EARLSCOURT

Alex. Allardyce

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EARLSCOURT

EARLSCOURT

A NOVEL OF PROVINCIAL LIFE

BY

ALEXANDER ALLARDYCE

AUTHOR OF
'BALMORAL: A ROMANCE OF THE QUEEN'S COUNTRY,'
'THE CITY OF SUNSHINE,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

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EARLSCOURT.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE DUNES HOUSE.

Stephen Brancepeth kept vigil in the Dunes House. For more than two hours he had been striding up and down his room with rapid steps, feeling rather uneasy about, than impatient for, the interview that was before him. When he left Cloete Sparshott he had walked about the Dunes until night fell, endeavouring to reason himself into a spirit of resignation, on the hypothesis that his situation had been brought about by fate,

and that circumstances had so powerfully shaped his course as to leave him no option except to bend to them. By men of Brancepeth's easy temperament, with a disposition to drift, a convenient theory of life is generally shaped from the doctrine of fatalism; but this theory is more easily reconcilable to the facts of the past than to the feelings of the present. What was past rendered his passion for Cloete Sparshott fruitless, wicked, and shameful, he reproachfully told himself; and yet this very evening he had confessed to her that he still loved her, he had held her in his arms, he had kissed her lips.

Wearied and spiritless he had gone home, and had endeavoured to banish all thought of his old love: he had taken with him a book to the dinner-table, and endeavoured to engross his mind in it during the meal. But the scene which had just taken place, and the interview to which he was now looking forward, and the sympathies and antipathies connected with the situation,

made him restless and nervous, and he sent dish after dish away untasted. Before the dessert could come on the table he had claret and cigars sent into his study; but even these comforts failed to soothe him. As the evening advanced he grew more and more fidgety, and took to pacing up and down the room, pausing now and then to look out at the night, which was still dark and gusty.

"You can let the servants go to bed, Pont," he said, as his man came in to look to his fire a little after ten o'clock; "but stay up yourself, as I expect a visitor who wishes to be private. See that you get them all out of the way on some pretence or other, as I don't wish any prying."

"All right, sir," said Pont; "but if she come in a carriage?"

"There will be no carriage. Mrs Brancepeth proposes to walk, and she particularly wishes that no one should see her except you."

"It is a cruel dark night for her to walk,

poor lady," said Pont, looking out of the window, "and mortal damp too. Shall I not go out with a lantern and wait for her to light her along, sir?" added he, with a dubious look which perhaps implied that such a duty might with more propriety have devolved upon his master.

"No," said Brancepeth; "it is her wish that no one should meet her. Besides, I have no idea when she will come or how she will manage to get away from Earlscourt. She will have to watch for an opportunity to get away unobserved. Perhaps," he added, with a sigh—it might be of regret, it might be of relief — "the dark night may have interfered with her plans. However, I shall stay up of course. Open the other shutters, Pont, that she may see the lights, and then you may go."

The night was "mortal damp," as Pont had said, and where the light from the window fell upon the honeysuckle and arbutus that clustered outside, the rain-

drops were seen sparkling in large beads. Brancepeth ran his eye along the narrow gravelled drive that wound up through the dark firs until it reached the level of the Dunes; and anxiously scanned every dark object that caught his eye as unfamiliar. He had never noticed anything before at that first turn. It was moving. No, it was but the wind swaying a branch. Here was surely a dark figure at the side of the rockery, — he could make out, he could almost see her beckoning to him; and the more he strained his eyes, the more distinctly he could distinguish the person he expected. But as the seconds became minutes, and the only movements were in his own imagination, he saw that it was but a laurel bush that was playing tricks with his mind, and he resumed his impatient walk up and down the room.

Meanwhile Mr Pont had got the servants disposed of—not without grumbling on the part of the cook, who, with a slippered foot planted on each extremity of the kitchen-

fender, was revelling in the exciting fiction of a penny paper.

"I don't know why you are a-makin' all this fuss about shuttin' up the 'ouse to-night o' all nights i' the year, Mr Pont," protested the aggrieved female; "just when I was beginnin' to feel my ale comfatible inside o' me, and wantin' to know whether Rosabella *did* stab the markiss when he kep' his appintment. It's scarcely gone ten yet."

"Who's going to be kept out of bed by you and your Rosabellas and marquises?" retorted Mr Pont, as he laid hold of the moderator of the kitchen lamp. "I want to go to bed, and I ain't a-going until I can see the house made fast. There was an attempted burglary at Alderman Hanmer's two nights ago, and they hain't caught the thieves yet. Take your marquises and a dip up-stairs, if you've got to."

When the house was all quiet, Pont gently opened the outer door, which he had ostentatiously locked and chained in the

presence of his subordinate Thomas, and leaving it a little ajar, retired to his own room at the other end of the hall, where, having stirred his fire to a bright blaze and thrown himself into an easy-chair with his legs well elevated on another, he musingly waited the further development of events.

"It is a rum start," soliloquised Mr Pont, —"it is a rum start altogether, and I'd like to know what is to be the upshot of it all. Here have we been married for more than a year, and we ain't a bit nearer settled than we were then, when we left that blessed little church at Nice in a fine frosty morning that would have frozen the horange-blossoms if we had had any. How is it all to end? How is it to be consimmated? as the lawyers says. Henveloped in mystery," sighed Mr Pont, as he gently pulled a little table towards him and refreshed himself with a glass of his master's sherry—"henveloped in mystery and ennygmies, the prospect is no-

where; but there will be a bust some day, and when it comes it will be a Wolcano."

"They can't go on this way long," resumed Mr Pont, after he had again paid his respects to the decanter; "murder will hout. Somebody is sure to smell a rat, and then peach. There was Minton, even, who said it would be as good as a couple of hundred pound in my pocket if I gave his lordship the office; and then we could take a hotel with posting. Oh, woman! what a wiper thou are. 'No, Minton,' says I,—'no, Minton. I'm not above my pay, and I likes my perquisites, but I never set alongside you in a bar parlour with a couple of hundred pound earned that way.' 'But suppose my lord cuts up dead rusty,' says she, 'and takes away all the money; he can do it, for it is in the will. Where are they then, and where are we?' That's true. We'd find ourselves seated on the hopposition side of the 'ouse, I doubt. Well, in that case I should not have to marry Minton — least-

ways, not of necessary consequence, — and *wirtute me convoler*, as my old master Mr Squanderley said, when he bolted from Cambridge in Mother Runch's gownd and petticoats to escape the bailiffs."

"I suppose she'll bring Minton with her," said Mr Pont, rising and looking out from the window. "I'd better get some more sherry from the dining-room, for there ain't more nor enough for myself, and we may as well have a fight while our betters are doing their billing and cooing. She is rising aged is Minton; but so is her mistress for that matter, and if my master ain't above marryin' a woman older than himself, why should Eddard Pont make bones about it?"

With candle in hand, Mr Pont was making for the dining-room on the other side of the hall, when a whistle from the shrubbery was heard. "That is her, to a moral," he said, setting down his candle and opening the door a little wider. "I heard a whistle, sir," he added to his master, who now came hastily

from his room and passed out into the darkness.

"Stay here, Pont," said Brancepeth hurriedly, "and let us get them in as quietly as possible. Keep your eyes open, too, and see that none of the servants are prying about;" and he ran quickly down the steps and looked about him. He heard a rustle behind a bush, and a dark figure ran forward and threw its arms around his neck.

"Oh Stephen!" murmured Dorothy, "what I have gone through to get to you! I was frightened to death by the darkness; but I durst not show it, lest Minton should give way altogether. Oh, my own love! say you are glad to see me again."

"Am I not!" said Brancepeth, kissing her fondly. "My wife is indeed a heroine to brave so much for the sake of seeing me. I could have almost sacrificed my longing for you rather than that you should have been exposed to the damp night-air—and so dark too."

"Don't say so, Stephen, darling," said Dorothy, hanging on his neck. "I would go through fire and water to come to you, if it were only for so short a space as this must be."

Brancepeth kissed her for reply, and putting his arm round her waist, led her up the steps and into his room. "Be cautious now, Pont, and see that the house is kept quiet," was his injunction as he closed the door behind him.

"Second division, left wheel," said Mr Pont, as he jauntily put *his* arm round Minton's waist, and whirled her into his pantry. "There you are, my beauty, as fresh and as pretty as a crocus at Christmas, and laden with dew too," and Mr Pont attempted to brush the dew off Minton's lips in imitation of his master's example.

"Hands off now, Mr Pont," retorted Minton. "Remember, if they're married we ain't—yet at any rate; and if you do love me, give me a pair of dry stockings."

Meanwhile, in Mr Brancepeth's study, Dor-

othy was clinging fondly to her husband as they sat side by side, while he kissed and patted her and smoothed her damp hair. "You must have caught your death of cold, dearest," he said, drawing her towards the blazing fire. "I cannot forgive myself for being the cause of your having come out thus. Why did you not allow me to meet you and bring you here?"

"Oh Stephen! dearest, I felt I must come. It seems years since I have seen you, and it is much more insupportable to be near you without seeing you, than when I know there is an impassable distance between us; and when I hear your name mentioned, as I sometimes do, I feel that it is almost impossible not to betray myself."

"I too wish that all this concealment and mystery were over, Dora," replied Brancepeth gravely. "You cannot think how my false position here preys upon me. I believe people in Earlsport who know all about how my father threw me off, have started all sorts of

speculations as to how I have been able all at once to blossom out into a householder and a capitalist—luckily none of them near the truth. I say luckily for you, dearest; for my own part, I would feel a relief if the world knew everything."

"Have patience, Stephen—have patience, for my sake;" and Dorothy held up her face to be kissed. She was now sitting close to Brancepeth, her head resting on his shoulder, and her face turned up towards his, while his arms closely encircled her. "You know the dread I have of Lord Earlsfield; but I am sure I shall manage everything rightly if I only get time and can take the right way."

"Well, though he does his worst, all he can do is to enforce the conditions of your aunt's will, and hold that you have forfeited your fortune by marrying without his consent, and secure it for himself. Let him do so; it will at least vindicate me from the charge of having married you for your money."

"If that were the only doubt I had," said Dorothy, with a sigh. "But sometimes, dearest, when I am alone and dull and unhappy, I imagine that you just *allowed* me to marry you. You had been so ill—nearly dead; and because I was kind to you, and nursed you, and did not conceal my fondness for you as you grew better, you were gallant enough to say you loved me. I doubt if a man can really love a woman five years older than himself."

Five years! oh Dorothy Colpoys! When Sir Bernard and Debrett, too, know so much better in spite of your clear eyes, fresh complexion, and white teeth. Console yourselves, mature virgins, whose names are not written in these august registers, and whose ages, real or assumed, have been confided only to the conservative secrecy of a census schedule. Console yourselves. Nobility is embarrassed by its own honours.

"Dear one, why should I not love you?" said Brancepeth, pressing his cheek against hers. "I don't believe that fiction, that you

are older than I am. I would not believe it though you showed me a date written in the Earlscourt Family Bible. I should be positive there was a mistake. You are so young in heart; and as for your beauty, dear, it can never fade in my eyes."

"Ah! I do hope you will always think thus. I must die if you were not to love me, or if you were to look with love on any other woman. That is what I fear most, so long as people do not know that we are married. Some one else may fall in love with you."

"Let us cast off the mask then, Dora, if you fear for me," said Brancepeth. "Claim me openly as your own property, and then possible trespassers will be sufficiently warned."

"Alas!" answered Dorothy, with a shiver, "there is always Earlsfield and that horrible will. And I could not bear to think that I was dragging you into poverty. Then indeed you would have good reason to cease loving me."

"Don't say that, Dora," broke in Brance-

peth; "I cannot bear to have the idea of money mixed up with our marriage. If your brother will have it, let him take the money in heaven's name, and let me work for you. Anything would be better than this life of idleness and secrecy — and separation from you," he gallantly added.

"How good you are, my own!" cried Dorothy; "and how I wish we could shake ourselves clear of both Lord Earlsfield and Aunt Pye's money and everything! And that you could be a barrister and member of Parliament, or even a doctor, and that we could live together in a house of our own; and then how proud I would be to see how every one admired my husband!"

"Every one is not so blinded by partiality as you are, dear Dora," said Brancepeth; "but it would be the pleasure of my life to labour truly and faithfully to make up to you for the sacrifice you have made for me. Your love would be a strong tower for me to take refuge in when trouble or

failure came. And since I saw you I have seen my father; and it now rests with myself whether I am not to become his partner in the bank, and the successor to his fortune and business. So, dearest, why not at once go to Lord Earlsfield and let us look the world honestly in the face?"

"But you do not know how hard Earlsfield can be," sighed Dorothy. "He has no object but to save up money against the time when we get a higher title. Earl of Earlsfield sounds natural and pretty, doesn't it? But that poor boy, Harold, will never earn it; and Earlsfield looks upon anything the rest of the family gets as so much money of which the peerage has been cheated. He would think of Harold and declare that he owed it as a duty to Aunt Pye's memory to see the terms of her will strictly carried out. He did it before—at least he always said he would do it if I did not marry to please him," corrected Dorothy, feeling that reference to any previous occa-

sions on which Lord Earlsfield had been forced to exercise his discretion under the will of Lady Pye was not specially called for.

"Only have patience for a little longer," she urged; "it will all come right. I have a presentiment that something will happen to bring Earlsfield round to consent, if we only wait long enough. And remember, my darling, it is as hard upon me as upon you."

"I think of that," replied Brancepeth, "and the thought that you also are oppressed by the weight of a secret makes the burden of the mystery yet more intolerable. In heaven's name let us end it. If Lord Earlsfield will have the money, let him take it. I shall accept my father's offer, and then I may avow our marriage without fear of any imputation of mercenary motives."

Dorothy sighed. "I could never bear to lose the money—not for myself; but do you think that I would allow myself to be a burden to you—that I would see you toiling to support me? Your life would grow bitter

under the drudgery, and you would then begin to regret having married an old woman who had nothing to give you but her foolish love."

"When you give me that you give me all, Dora," returned her husband, softly stroking his wife's hair; "besides, there will probably be no great amount of drudgery involved. Though I take up the partnership my father now offers me, I suspect I shall prove more an ornamental than a useful member of the firm of Brancepeth Brothers. My father is very rich, and he is old too; I have no doubt that all his wealth will come to me, now that the original cause of quarrel between us is entirely removed."

"Ah!" cried Dora, quickly, "you mean the Sparshott girl, — the Museum keeper's daughter. That, you told me, was what had quarrelled you and your father. They were talking of it at the Court to-day. She is very beautiful, and you have seen her again. Is it not so?"

Brancepeth held his peace.

"I say you have seen her again," cried Dorothy, jumping up from her seat, and standing erect before the fire while she looked angrily at her husband. The good-humour and beaming affection were all gone from her face now; her eyebrows were drawn together until the angry sparkle of her eyes was almost hid in their deep shadow; her cheeks wore a dark-purple flush, and her nostrils quivered as Lord Earlsfield's were wont to do when he was in his worst humours. A flash of jealousy had transformed her immediately from a woman loving and craving love to an irresponsible virago. "I say you have seen her again," she exclaimed, stepping forward with a stamp of her foot, and seizing Brancepeth by the wrist. "I dare you to deny it."

"I have no wish to deny it," said Brancepeth, in calm, steady tones.

"And you tell this to me—to me, your wedded wife! Is this your truth? Is this your gratitude? Stephen Brancepeth, I be-

lieve you are the falsest, the basest, the most deceitful of men."

"Try to compose yourself, Dora, and listen to me."

"Listen to you! That you may tell me lies; that you may weave some pretty fiction to cover your guilty intrigues. No; I have been deluded too long. While you have been all the while pretending a wish to have our marriage disclosed, you have been availing yourself of the secret to make fresh conquests, and revive your old loves. But I shall soon put an end to this."

"You will indeed if you continue to raise your voice in that fashion," retorted Brancepeth, whose temper, joined to a feeling that he was not wholly blameless, was fast beginning to fail him. "I have always wished the matter made public, but I confess," he added sarcastically, "that I should have preferred a more fitting opportunity and a more dignified manner of making the announcement."

"Stephen," she cried, clenching his wrist, and shaking his arm in the extremity of her excitement, "as God hears the both of us, do you still love that girl?"

"God help me! I do," said Brancepeth, looking his wife pitifully in the face.

A piercing shriek rang through the Dunes House, rising above the whistling of the wind, and startling the sparrows from their nests among the ivy outside the windows. It was followed by a fainter one, which died away in a prolonged scream; and when Pont and Minton, disturbed in their discussion of a cold pie and hot potables, burst into the room, they found Dorothy lying on the hearth, with Brancepeth kneeling over her supporting her head. The angry flush on her cheek was subsiding into a death-like pallor, and her arms lay helpless by her side.

CHAPTER XVIII.

REDINTEGRATIO AMORIS.

"Miss Dorothy! Miss Dorothy! What is this?" said Minton, as she rushed to her mistress's aid. "What *is* the matter, sir?" she added, darting an angry look towards Brancepeth.

"Your mistress has fainted—has got a fit, I believe," said Brancepeth huskily. "Get water, Pont, get brandy; d——n you, don't stand staring there like an idiot."

Meanwhile Minton had begun to chafe Dorothy's hands, and to fan her face with a pocket-handkerchief, and Pont returning presently with water, the maid laved her mistress's face and bathed her temples. As

Dorothy began to show signs of returning animation, Brancepeth and Minton lifted her on to a couch, where she lay sighing heavily while her whole frame trembled violently from her recent excitement. She opened her eyes for a minute and looked wildly round, but speedily closed them again with a deep sob.

"Dora, dearest!" said Brancepeth, seating himself by her side on the couch with her hand in his, while with the other he smoothed her disordered hair. "Rouse yourself; it is all a mistake. You have been hasty, and I have been unkind; but believe me, you are wrong."

"Oh, Stephen!" she cried, springing up and clinging to his neck; "tell me, tell me truly, that you no longer care for her; that you will never see, never speak to her again. I shall kill myself if you are false to me."

Brancepeth having motioned Minton to leave the room, kissed his wife fondly as the safest and most satisfactory assurance, while, with her head resting upon his breast, she sobbed away the remains of her passion.

Stephen was a man whom a woman's tears completely unnerved, and the resolutions which he had formed when Dorothy made the attack upon him, to explain his feelings towards Cloete Sparshott,—to tell his wife frankly that his love for Cloete had revived as soon as ever he saw her, and that he was determined to effectually combat this weakness; that he had seen the girl and spoken with her, and told her that there could be no renewal of their former affection; and that he would control himself, and ever be to her a good and loyal husband,—all this Brancepeth felt it behoved him as an honest and honourable man to say, and when Dorothy had broken out upon him in her anger he had determined to say it. But here was Dorothy sobbing against his breast as if her heart would burst, and every sob sapped away some of his resolution.

"You promise me you will never see her again?" pleaded Dorothy, looking up with tearful eyes in his face. "It is not that I

mistrust you, but she does not know that you are married—that you can be nothing to her; and it would be misery to me to think that she might again seek your love. You *will* promise me?"

"I do promise you, Dora," assented Brancepeth. "I shall never seek to see her again unless I am thrown into her company in some way that would make my evasion of her attract attention. But why should you be thus sillily jealous? You know how I love you! It does not speak much for your confidence either in my heart or my honour to suspect that I could forget my wife," he added, with a sigh which was drawn from him half by a feeling that there was hypocrisy in his remark, and half by a perception that a semblance of emotion was necessary to authenticate his assertion.

"I can never forget that I am an old woman, and that you are a young man, my love," she replied, half smiling through her tears.

"Nonsense, Dora! I forbid you ever to

say that again," said Stephen. "If there is any difference, which I would never remember if you did not keep constantly repeating it, you have the advantage of me in youngness of spirit and freshness of love. It will be long before time lays any rough touch on your beauty, and before long we shall have got to the end of our state of separation, and when we are always together there will be no room for jealousy on either side."

"You jealous!" said Dorothy, with a faint smile. "I wish I was sure that you loved me well enough to be capable of feeling jealous; but that fate is reserved for me. But we must leave this place soon; for while we are here, even if I can trust you, I cannot control my own silly fears."

"Agreed," said Brancepeth, stifling a feeling of impatience; "but remember, Dora, we had resolved to stay here until you had got an opportunity for disclosing our marriage. Let us put an end to this secrecy. Let me close with my father's offer, and then we are in-

dependent of Lord Earlsfield's opinion. For the sake of my honour, for the sake of my peace, for the sake even of saving me from the temptations you have suggested, I beg of you, Dora, to let this be done."

"Yes, yes," replied Dorothy, with a shiver, "it shall be done; but Lord Earlsfield—I shall think of it and let you know what I shall do, but I have been too upset just now to form any plans."

"Well, here comes Pont with refreshments, and you must eat something and drink a glass of wine. It is the first time you have eaten and drunken in your own house, my dear," said Brancepeth, with an affectation of gaiety, as Pont made his appearance with a slight but dainty supper upon a small tray, which he and Minton had taken advantage of the cook's absence to prepare.

The road from the Dunes House to Earlscourt was not less long, nor was the night less dark, when Dorothy set out on her return journey. The wind had gone down, but the break-

ers were still thundering dismally along the sands. Under the trees of Earlscourt Park there were eerie alternations of light and darkness. But Dorothy, with her arm firmly linked in her husband's, thought the way all too short, and was sorry when the Court appeared before them in its gaunt ghastly outlines amid the uncertain light. They could not talk much, and only on indifferent subjects, for Minton's dread of the dark got the better of her natural respect, and she kept close to her mistress's heels the whole way. But when Dorothy took a hurried adieu of her husband, when they had reached the limit beyond which he could not safely venture, her last words, when she held up her face for a farewell kiss, were, "Remember your promise!"

It was with very mixed feelings that Brancepeth retraced his steps in darkness and solitude towards the Dunes House. The events of the day had sorely tried him. His accidental meeting with Cloete Sparshott had

showed him how strongly rooted was his old love for the girl, and how little he was able to withstand it. Dorothy's charges had rudely recalled him to a sense of his duty; and he felt all the more resentful that his conscience told him there was justification for her jealousy. And yet Dorothy was his wife; he was bound to her in faith and troth pledged at the altar. Brancepeth was a man of honour and morality, and he flatteringly told himself that it was impossible that he could fail in his duty to the woman he had taken for better for worse. He was grateful to Dorothy; he even persuaded himself that he loved her truly. When he was in distress, almost in absolute want, and stretched helplessly on a sick-bed in a wretched lodging in a French village, she had found him out as an act of charity from an Englishwoman to an Englishman from her own neighbourhood, and had tended and nursed him through convalescence to health with all the devotion of a sister. She had worn an angelic halo

then as she bent over his sick-bed, and had handed him cooling drinks and strengthening delicacies; she had seemed beautiful as a ministering spirit to his poor sunken eyes; and when he recovered and saw the plainest indications of her tender interest in the life which she had preserved, what could Brancepeth do but dedicate it to her? Confidences were interchanged. Brancepeth told his story frankly—a story he firmly believed to be one of the past in all its relations; Dorothy explained the restrictions which Lady Pye's will had imposed upon her; and thus a secret marriage was agreed on, which was to be concealed until the propitious moment arrived for breaking the news to Lord Earlsfield. They had been mildly happy on the Continent, keeping well aloof from those highways and byways most frequented by their countrymen. Brancepeth felt like some shipwrecked mariner, who, after much tossing upon the waters and struggles for life, has reached a beautiful new-world island, where

dreams of the past do not disturb, and cares for the future fret not. He had lived and loved; the pleasures of life had failed him; now he was to content himself with its more sober joys. He persuaded himself that he was happy — that he ought to be so; that he loved his wife—he certainly ought to do so; and indeed he realised all Dorothy's fondest imaginations. There was still the dread of what might befall them when Lord Earlsfield came to know what had taken place; but even this apprehension threw a dash of romance over their otherwise matter-of-fact life, to which Dorothy was sentimental enough not to be indifferent. Their present was all the happier that there was an element of uncertainty in the future to give a zest to its enjoyment.

Dorothy, since she inherited Lady Pye's famous legacy, had fully availed herself of her privileges as a woman of property and a *femme sole* to wander where she pleased, with Minton, her maid, for companion; and

Lord Earlsfield, feeling secure in the check which he possessed upon her matrimonial views, had never sought to restrict her liberty. But she had always spent some portion of every year at Earlscourt, and to absent herself now might provoke suspicion. But what was she to do with her husband in the meantime? Dorothy, it must be owned, had little faith in men. She could trust Brancepeth best under her own eye. A suspicion always haunted her that the difference in their ages gave her a less hold upon her husband than she would have had had they been equal in point of years. She could not go to Earlscourt while he remained behind in France, a prey to designing young widows at watering-places. No, he must be kept near her; and when Dorothy read in the 'Earlsport Mercury' that the Dunes House was to be sold at a reduced price in consequence of the lamented death of Sir Alexander M'Chanter, she immediately chalked out a plan of operations. They would both re-

turn to Earlsport, and at Earlscourt she would feel assured that no one could run away with her husband from the Dunes House under her own eyes. They would be secret and careful, and their marriage need never be suspected; and when the summer was over, they would return to the Continent and resume their happy domestic life. And then, when all was made manifest, they would make their home at the Dunes House with Lord Earlsfield's blessing.

But Brancepeth had seriously opposed this plan. Earlsport was the last place in the world he would have chosen for his residence. There were the painful memories of his old love; there was the awkward relationship in which he stood to his father; and there was last, but not least, the speculation which his return would be sure to set agoing. But all these Dorothy overruled. It was necessary, she argued, that she should break the news of their marriage to Lord Earlsfield; and how could she dare to do this, unless he

was at hand to support her when necessary? He had frankly warned her of the danger of his encountering Cloete Sparshott, but Dorothy had overruled his fears by her assurances of her trust in his faith and honour. Perhaps she had that womanly feeling which delights in exhibiting a prize that the one has snatched from the other, although Dorothy must for the present deny herself the pleasure of flaunting her conquest.

Once persuaded to take the plunge, Brancepeth found compensation in the thought of the mystification which his return must produce among his old friends in Earlsport. The mortification which he doubted not his father must experience at hearing of his return, prosperous, with plenty of money, and with no need to appeal to him for assistance, afforded prospect of a species of revenge not wholly disagreeable. The fact that the banker had entirely cast him off had been so notorious, that his reappearance as the proprietor of the Dunes House, which had always made

its occupant a personage in Earlsport's estimation, would elevate him to the rank of a popular hero. And as for the rest—well, with his aimless life he might just as well live there as anywhere else, until the time came for Dorothy and himself to return to the Continent.

But a short residence among the solitudes of the Dunes sufficed to arouse a spirit of unrest in Brancepeth. He began to think seriously over the false position in which he had placed himself—a position derogatory to himself and compromising to Dorothy. The marriage must be avowed, whatever the result. If Lord Earlsfield was able to declare Dorothy's inheritance forfeit, then he must endeavour to make a way for himself and his wife. His father, he told himself, could make no possible objection to such a marriage as he had made; and now that Cloete Sparshott was out of the question, why should he not be reinstated in his former position as the heir of Brancepeth Brothers,

and received as a partner into the bank? And as if in answer to this reasoning, his father's proposition had come of its own accord. So Brancepeth was now impatient to have the disclosure over, and his career settled. If Lord Earlsfield refused his consent, Brancepeth would at least be saved from the charge of having married for money. But Dorothy had her own views. Like her other brother and sister—with the exception of the hardened colonel—she stood in terror of the head of the house, and dreaded the scene that would ensue when she announced the step which she had taken. She knew Lord Earlsfield's grasping nature; that he had made up his mind to prevent her marrying; and that he surely calculated on securing to the title the reversion of her money. She had, too, a fixed idea that by virtue of her wealth she had a more secure hold upon her husband's fidelity and affection; and she shrank from being left penniless herself, or even from seeing her husband made indepen-

dent of her money. So in spite of Brancepeth's pressure there seemed little prospect of Dorothy taking the first step to terminate the mystery.

"There must be an end put to this," was the resolution with which Brancepeth returned home after his dark excursion. "Life would be intolerable if it were to go on thus. What with Dora's jealousy, and Cloete Sparshott's ignorance of matters, I shall flounder into some foolish mess. I hope I am not a villain, —and I am not a Mormon or a Mohammedan; and yet—but what's the use of moralising? What is, is."

CHAPTER XIX.

IN A SUMMER-HOUSE.

At the end of the garden at Earlscourt there is an old summer-house, with ivy-covered walls and a high dome-shaped roof, honeycombed with pigeon-holes. This had been the pigeon-house in days when dovecots were the necessary appurtenance of every large country mansion about Earlsport; but a former Lady Earlsfield, attracted by the beauty of the situation and of the fine sea-view it commanded, had turned the lower part of it into a summer-house, and had confined the pigeons to the dome. Standing atop of a little mound, it overlooked the high walls of the park, and, through an opening cut in the tall elms, com-

manded a prospect stretching over the slopes of the Dunes, and far out to sea. Save the fluttering of the pigeons and the sparrows in the ivy, and the occasional sight of a sail darting across the narrow vista of water, it was a retreat disturbed by neither sight nor sound. All round about the grass grew long and rank, untouched by the scythe, and the narrow gravel walk that led to it was half choked up by weeds. Lord Earlsfield did not delight in the picturesque; Mrs Firebrace had a horror of damp; and Dorothy, when she wanted solitude, preferred her own room: so the dovecot was seldom visited by these members of the family. Only Mary Donne was in the habit of coming thither with a basket of crumbs to feed the pigeons, and on fine forenoons she would not unfrequently bring a novel or a volume of poetry with her, and spend an hour or two reading and dreaming of the possibilities of life which her book presented, and of which she as yet knew nothing by experience.

On such occasions George Colpoys found himself not unfrequently attracted thither. Time hung heavy upon his hands at Earlscourt, and it was very seldom that fortune offered him an alternative to spending the recess elsewhere. "He had the run of his teeth there for nothing, and that was a consideration for a fellow so hard up as himself," he frankly admitted; and Earlscourt also presented the advantage of being the place of all others where he was most secure against the intrusion of his constituents,—for they all either hated or feared Lord Earlsfield too much to set foot within his grounds.

Of late years the member had frequently succeeded in quartering himself upon his sister Dorothy while she was living on the Continent, but last recess she had refused point-blank to receive him, and this season she was at home. So he found himself obliged to make the best of Earlscourt, which he did by keeping as much as possible out of the way of his eldest brother, by dawdling

over the newspapers, and by smoking about the stable-yard. He could sometimes manage to slip away for a few days at a time to race-meetings that were not so remote as to make the journey too expensive, or to take a week in London on the plea of political business, where between his lodgings and his club he could contrive to live at little outlay.

But to the member's genial nature Earlscourt must always be chilling and dull; and he had only just begun to realise that Mary Donne's company was a resource to be made something of. Until this visit to Earlscourt he had looked upon her as a girl barely escaped from the school-room and the insipid influences of bread-and-butter, and his interest in her had been confined to vague speculations as to the obscure causes of the regard which Lord Earlsfield so evidently showed for the young orphan. George had not that belief in his brother's generosity of character which could admit of the supposition that Lord Earlsfield's kindness to Mary Donne was wholly disinter-

ested, or that it was sufficiently explained by his old friendship for her father. But he was too lazy to trouble himself much about the matter; and though he had heard a rumour that Lord Earlsfield intended to make Miss Donne his second wife, he knew enough of his brother to treat it as absurd.

Now that he had made friends with Mary Donne, and had found an agreeable variation of the usual monotony in dangling about after her, and in carrying on a mild flirtation, more in jest than in earnest, he had begun to speculate, with as much seriousness as was in his nature, whether Lord Earlsfield would be likely to do something handsome for his favourite, and whether, if prospects of a suitable provision were to be forthcoming, he himself might not as well marry the young lady.

"Who knows but that I might do something after all," the member had said to himself. "I have noticed that the married fellows are always most regular in their

attendance on the House,—takes 'em away from home, I daresay. But perhaps she would not have me, if I were to put it to her seriously. She may think me rising aged, but my wind and my legs are still sound enough, at any rate."

In spite of the disqualification of two-and-forty years, George continued to hang about Mary Donne when quiet opportunities offered, with the consoling reflection that she was pleasant to talk to, even if nothing else came of it. It was surprising how frequently, without any arrangement or understanding, they encountered each other in the course of the day, going their several ways after a brief interval of innocent chit-chat. George had found out that the dovecot was a favourite haunt of Miss Donne's, and this discovery had opened his eyes to the hitherto unappreciated advantages which the retreat afforded for enjoying a quiet cigar. Mary, on her part, had nothing to say against the intrusion; nor did she object to George following her

about. His easy pleasant manners, and empty good-humoured talk, were a relief to the stiffness of Lord Earlsfield or the sanctimonious jeremiads of Mrs Firebrace. The twenty years or so between their ages, from Mary's point of view, seemed a gulf across which there could be no danger of love-making. She had no thought that the member did not follow her about out of sheer idleness and to escape his own thoughts, and she saw no good reason why she should not allow him to amuse both her and himself on such a footing.

On the particular occasion with which we have now to do, Mary Donne had fed the pigeons who were pecking on the gravel in front of the summer-house, struggling and jostling each other for the crumbs in most undove-like fashion. She laid down her basket on the rough seat made of plaited birch-boughs that formed three-quarters of a circle round the walls of the summer-house, and put the broad straw hat which she had

been wearing on the old worm-eaten table that stood in the centre. She had a novel with her—not a very new one, and borrowed from the Earlsport Select Subscription Library, for Lord Earlsfield did not patronise Mudie, and held that every gentleman behoved to buy the books which he wished to read. A light wind blew in from the sea, and stirred her silky chestnut hair into ripples like those of the waves she was looking out upon. The pure pink in her white complexion was warmed to a ruddy glow by her walk, and she pushed back her hair from her cheeks and temples to get the full benefit of the breeze. A ray of sunlight streamed into the summer-house, falling across her knees as she sat down, while her head remained in cool green shade cast from the old moss-grown walls. She opened her book, but did not begin to read, looking dreamily seawards, and she was not startled when the pigeons were hurriedly dispersed by a loud "Shoo!" and the ashes of a cigar

thrown among them, as George Colpoys darkened the doorway.

"May one come in and smoke?" he inquired, lazily leaning against the door, and poising his cigar airily between his thumb and his finger.

"Certainly, and with no need for an apology, as I am going away," replied Miss Donne. "I have fed my brood, which you have scared away so rudely, and now I am going back to the house."

"Nonsense!" said George; "why, you have only just come. Stay and talk to me, and I shall smoke towards the door. If there was any one in the house worth talking to, I am too modest to detain you."

"That means that the whole conversational talent of Earlscourt is at present in the dovecot in the person of Mr George Colpoys."

"No, I didn't mean anything of the kind. I can't say smart things, and if I could I would not waste them outside the House of

Commons. 'My humble abilities belong to my country,' as Earlsfield would say. It is odd now, isn't it, that I can never think of anything good to say there? I have sometimes thought of good things, but somehow or other it has always been at a time when I couldn't say them, and then I was sure to have forgot them before another opportunity came round."

"I hope the House will never know what it has lost, Mr Colpoys," observed Mary, demurely. "I would keep the secret to myself, if I were you. You would not like to add to the depressed feeling of the country about which the leader of the Opposition has been saying so much to his constituents this morning."

"Don't chaff me, now," said George, "and I will return good for evil. The sun is coming round on to your face, and I shall act as a screen;" and he came into the summer-house, and took up a position, half sitting half standing, by the old table directly in front of her.

"You mean to envelop me in clouds of cigar smoke," protested Mary; "but I don't know whether it would not be more pleasant to take my chance of tan. But how come you to be idle this morning? I heard you tell Lord Earlsfield at breakfast that you were going into statistics about Army Reform."

"Army Reform!" re-echoed the member; "if they go on as they are doing there will soon be nothing left of the army except statistics to go into. I wish I had gone into the army while there was an army; one would have had at least an object in life there."

"But you have surely got many objects in life," said Mary. "To be a member of Parliament must be the highest ambition of every commoner."

"What's the good of it?" retorted George, sucking his cigar gloomily. "I have been in Parliament these ten years, and what better am I for it? It's badger—badger, worry—worry. The Whips are always nagging you to come up for divisions; the electors worry

you about your votes; and Earlsfield is always badgering about things in general. And then it is just the toss up of a shilling whether I don't get kicked out of Earlsport next election. I wouldn't have the ghost of a chance if they care to run a red-hot Radical against me. I believe they would rather return a Conservative than lose the chance of spiting Earlsfield."

"They will never be so ungrateful," cried Mary Donne, indignantly, "after all that Lord Earlsfield has done for them. Why, almost all Earlsport is built on his ground, and it has been the Earlsfield family that has made the town."

"We don't think much of that nowadays. We are getting much too far ahead for such considerations. When people pay their rents they think they are quits with their landlords, and hang me if I don't think so too! I shouldn't mind going in for Radicalism myself, if it weren't that Earlsfield would throw me over."

"How horrible!" cried Mary, holding up her hands with an affected shudder.

"Nothing horrible about it," returned the member, puffing a last puff and hurling the end of his cigar out among the pigeons, who had again gathered to their crumbs. "There is no end of good men among the Radicals, and Ministers are always precious glad to shut them up with office or a post. I should have kicked over Earlsfield's traces and gone among them myself, if it weren't that a Radical can't get on without nagging, and worrying, and spouting, and that isn't my nature."

"But the British constitution," urged Mary, aghast at views so different from that high-toned Whiggery which was inculcated as the creed of the Earlsfield family; "think of the British constitution, Mr Colpoys."

"The British fiddlestick! my dear," said George, scornfully. "If there ever was such a thing, it has been abolished long ago—it is as extinct as the what d'ye-call-um—the

Dodo. It is every party for place, and every man for himself. But beg pardon for calling you 'my dear' in the fervour of my political feelings, although really I don't see why I shouldn't call you so."

"Oh, I am sure I don't mind," said Mary, carelessly; "but I am shocked to hear you speak in that dreadful way about the constitution and politics. What would Lord Earlsfield say if he heard you?"

"A great deal, I have no doubt, to very little purpose," replied the other. "These things are all very well for a peer with a stake in the country, but it is a different thing for younger brothers. I think younger brothers ought to be born with a natural hatred to the constitution. What a jolly time it must have been for those Egyptians in Genesis —or Exodus was it?—when the first-born were all bowled over by one shot!"

"Jolly for the younger sons, I suppose you mean," returned Mary, doubtfully, half fearing that she might be lending herself to

the propagation of an opinion that savoured slightly of impiety.

"Precisely so, my dear," said George. "There—I have called you my dear again. I don't know why it always comes on my tongue to-day. You are not angry, are you?"

"No, certainly not," replied Miss Donne; "you are always so good to me, I don't mind what you call me."

"Of course there can be no harm in it," reflected George, taking her hand. "You see I am, like Potiphar's—no, I mean Cæsar's —wife, above any suspicion of falling in love, for every one knows that I have no means of marrying any one; although, mind you, if I had, I don't say that I wouldn't make a point of falling in love with you at once."

"You make me share the sorrows of your poverty," said Mary, with a mock melancholy, but flushing also and endeavouring to withdraw her hand. "I don't know whether after that confession I can allow you to 'my dear' me again."

"I don't wonder at your laughing," grumbled the other; "but upon my word, it is not particularly amusing from my point of view. It is not nice to think that the idea of your falling in love with any one is ridiculous, though I am quite aware that is my case."

"I didn't mean that," said Mary, who was afraid she had hurt his feelings, and who thought besides that the conversation was taking an uneasy turn, although George Colpoys was not a man that any young woman would be apt to feel uneasy with; "of course you have a right to fall in love as well as any other gentleman."

"Have I? Then, by Jove, suppose that I were to fall in love with you!"

"I cannot suppose any such thing."

"Why not? Do you mean that I am too old?"

"No; I mean that the whole supposition is too absurd to discuss except in jest. And really, I think we might find something much

better worth talking about. I would rather you went back to Radicalism."

"Hang Radicalism! Now look here, Mary! I solemnly believe that I am in love with you. I have felt it coming on for a good while, though I didn't know what was the matter with me. But if I were in a position to marry, the first thing I would do would be to ask you to be my wife. But you see I am not; and though I were, it does not exactly follow that you would have me."

The conversation had really taken an awkward turn. Mary sat in confusion, her face turning now red, now pale. She had never thought of George Colpoys save in the light of a very pleasant companion, far removed from her own years, with whom she could permit herself a freedom that she would have shrunk from in the case of a man nearer her own age. And now he had all but declared that he loved her, though in such a way that she herself was left no reply in the

matter. She struggled to withdraw her hand, and felt half inclined to burst into tears.

"You see," resumed George, still holding fast by her hand and patting it paternally within his own—but what she was to see was destined to remain for the present unrevealed, for a shadow fell across the floor of the summer-house, a discreet cough announced a new arrival, and George had scarcely time to drop Miss Donne's hand and turn round, when a bareheaded footman appeared in the doorway.

"His lordship's compliments, Miss Donne, and his lordship wishes to see you puticklary in the libarry, when you are conwenient."

"Very good, Parker. Say to his lordship I shall be with him presently," said Mary, with a burning face, but with a sense of relief that the interview with George Colpoys was thus broken up, as she rose and gathered up her basket and her hat.

But the member was not going to allow her to escape so easily.

"You are not angry with me," he said, detaining her until the man was out of hearing. "You know it can't mean anything, worse luck. But we shall just be as we were—good friends, shall we not?"

"Yes," replied Mary, doubtfully, as she put forth her hand in response to his proffered clasp.

"You wouldn't let me kiss you, I suppose —just to show that you have no feeling in the matter?"

"Certainly not, sir," in a decided tone of indignation.

"Well, perhaps I should not have asked it," returned the member, meekly; but he raised her hand to his lips nevertheless. "And we are still good friends—you have promised, remember. And now I won't keep you, for the virtue of patience is not one of Earlsfield's most shining traits."

He leaned against the door of the summer-house, and watched her walk hurriedly up the path until she turned the corner of the flower-

garden and was lost to sight. He took a cigar from his case, and placed it in his mouth without lighting, sucking away at it unconsciously. Then he turned and went into the dovecot, and sat down on the seat where she had sat a little ago; and with bent head and hands spread out upon his knees communed with himself.

"I don't suppose it was any good," he reflected, bitterly; "but I couldn't have helped it for the life of me. She sat there looking so pretty and so good, with the sunlight playing on her face, and a dash of mischief in her eyes too—that I don't see how any fellow could have kept from loving her, and telling her so, too. I wonder if she could ever come to care for me? But what would be the good even if she did? Where's the money to come from? Shall I sound Earlsfield about the subject? No; I am pretty sure he has got some game of his own for her, whatever it is. If the Government would give me anything over

a thousand a-year, by Jove, I would play a hazard for her yet!"

But then came thoughts of wasted parliamentary opportunities; of quarrels with the Whips, who spoke their mind very strongly about his constancy in pairing, and his laxity in turning up at important divisions, and of the very moderate estimate at which his services were rated by the leaders of his party. There were debts, too, and no visible means of meeting them. Marriage was clearly a dream and a delusion; and George Colpoys could not but acknowledge the fact as he puffed away savagely at his unlit cigar.

CHAPTER XX.

IPHIGENIA.

MEANWHILE Mary Donne made her way as fast as she could to the house. She felt perturbed and fluttered by the member's talk. No one had ever spoken so to her before, and when she strove to recall his words she could hardly decide whether he had made love to her or not. Mary's ideas of love-making were derived entirely from popular novels, and from these she had been led to expect something more elevating, more melodramatic, and altogether more soul-subduing. And George Colpoys had nothing akin to a hero of romance. Was it not the proper form for a lover to go down on his knees, whereas George had sat all the

time perched on the edge of the table? After all, he had not said directly that he loved her; only that he would love her if he were in a position to afford to do so. It was all terribly commonplace and unsatisfactory, and quite enough to cry over. Then what was to come of it? Would he talk about it again the next time they met? How could she face him in that case? Or would he never allude to the subject afterwards? That, too, would be awkward, for there would be something between them then that would never be explained away. She had been almost told, too, that she was loved, and the situation was so novel that—well, that she would perhaps like to hear it again. Then this sudden summons from Lord Earlsfield was rather startling. Mary felt as guilty as if his lordship had divined what was going on in the summer-house, and had summoned her to scold her. But that was too absurd. Still it was very seldom that he sent for Mary; and on these rare occasions she had always felt frightened,

although he had been very kind and courteous, and almost tender. Her mother had had a very small property, which Lord Earlsfield administered; and he had several times taken her into the library to explain matters about it. Yes; it must be about something of that kind that he was now going to talk; yet her heart misgave her, and she wished the interview were well over.

She found Lord Earlsfield sitting at his writing-table, his face leaning on his hands, his eyes looking intently into vacancy. He scarcely perceived her enter; and she noticed a pale and careworn expression in his face which she had not observed at breakfast, when he had been unusually cheerful and talkative. He looked up wearily as she approached the table, and it seemed to her as if he avoided her look, for he half turned away his head as he led her to a seat close beside his own chair.

"I hope I have not disturbed you, my dear," he said, gently. Lord Earlsfield had always

called her "my dear" in these interviews, and the expression had never required an apology, as it had done in the case of his brother.

"I was down in the dovecot," said Mary, simply; and then, as if determined to avoid even the shadow of duplicity, she added, "I was talking to Mr Colpoys when I got your message. I hope I have not kept you waiting."

"Talking to George!" responded Lord Earlsfield, dreamily. "Poor George is so idle himself that he can make free with every one's time; and yet I suppose you find even him amusing in a dull place like this. But I hope we shall improve, Mary," he added, with a forced smile and a tragic effort to look gay. "Harold is coming home to-morrow, and I trust he will make things more lively. It won't be unpleasant for you, at all events, to have a companion of your own age here."

"We shall all be very glad to see him," said Mary warmly, remembering how much Lord Earlsfield was bound up in his son, and

how jealous he was of any indication of a consciousness that Harold was not as other young men are; "I do not think I have ever seen him."

"No, my dear, I don't think you have. It is two years since I last saw him, and I expect to find him much changed. He used to be a very good-looking lad, unless I am partial," with a faint smile; "and the Colpoyses have rarely been Adonises; but his mother's father was one of the handsomest men of his day. There is a picture of him by Lawrence, of which the Prince Regent had a replica painted for Carlton House."

There was a long pause, during which Lord Earlsfield passed his hand wearily over his brow, and remained looking steadily before him with vacant gaze, while Mary waited patiently to hear what was to be said next.

"I hope Harold and you will be good friends," he at last resumed; "friendships should go down in families. Your father and I were like brothers—more attached to each

other than many brothers are; and when I stood by his open grave, I felt that I had lost the best and the truest friend I should ever have in this world."

Mary Donne had almost no recollection of her father, who had died when she was little more than an infant, but she was affected by the tone of strong feeling in which Lord Earlsfield spoke, and her tears began to flow freely.

"I promised him before he died," continued he, taking her hand softly within his own, "that you should be to me as a daughter. I have always looked upon you as one, though I am not good at showing my feelings; but Philip Donne's child must always be to me as my own."

"Oh, Lord Earlsfield," said Mary "you have been only too good and kind to me. Who else but you would have troubled themselves about a poor penniless orphan like me?"

"Hush, Mary," said Lord Earlsfield. "Your father, if he had been in my place, would have done all for Harold that I have done for you,

and done it better, too, for he had an open heart that shed kindliness and love upon all who came near him. And that, my dear, is why I trust you and Harold will be dear friends."

"I am sure we shall," said Mary, still much affected. "I shall do all I can to please him and make him like me," she innocently added.

"I live so much within myself," continued Lord Earlsfield, grasping her hand nervously, "that I dream much of the future of those whom I love. It will be a great weight upon my mind until I get Harold settled in life. His peculiarly susceptible temperament, which, I am happy to think, has now almost disappeared, makes it very desirable that he should be married to a good loving woman with a warm tender heart—one who could share his troubles with him, and make his sorrows her own. Of course, he would have no difficulty in making what Society would call an excellent match, for he has rank, and will have an income above most of his equals in the peerage; and when I say equals, I don't mean brewers, or

city peers or bankers," he interjected, with a little sniff of scorn, forgetting for the moment that one John Colpoys had once lived at the Silver Salmon in Aldersgate, and had ministered to the fasts of that bright occidental star, Queen Elizabeth, of most happy memory. "I have been saving all my life, and Harold is my sole heir. But I have no wish that he should make what is called a great match; the Earlsfields can gain nothing by blood. If my son choose a loving and virtuous girl of unstained gentle stock, he will marry to my complete satisfaction."

A sudden terror took hold of Mary Donne, and a dreadful possibility dimly broke upon her mind. Why should Lord Earlsfield speak to her thus? He was not in the habit of taking her, or any one else, into his confidence, and why had he sent for her now to speak to her of all these things? She did not dare to think what further revelation of Lord Earlsfield's purpose there might be yet to come, and she sat tearful and silent, with difficulty

controlling herself so far that he might not see how she was trembling in every limb.

"It would never be my wish to control young people's affections, although in our rank it is often most just and necessary to do so," continued Lord Earlsfield, gaining calmness as he neared the point at which he had been driving. "Harold and you will necessarily be thrown much together. I am not going to exercise any influence upon the inclinations of either of you, but I thought it would be better—that it would make things more pleasant for you—if you were to know that nothing would make me happier than to see the two beings whom I love best unite their lives. I may say," concluded he solemnly, "that no earthly event would give me the same entire satisfaction as a marriage between Harold and you."

He paused and turned to look at Mary, but almost immediately withdrew his glance. She was sobbing as if her heart would break, and not a word could she utter to express the

horror with which her guardian's proposal—for she could not conceal from herself that it was nothing less — filled her. To marry a madman!—for that was the destiny which Lord Earlsfield was certainly holding out to her. Death would surely be better! Why then could she not die at once, and escape such a fate? Lord Earlsfield felt that he could read her fears, and he drew the girl towards him. He put an arm round her very tenderly, and drew her to his breast, while he passed a hand softly over the smooth tresses of her hair, while Mary's sobs increased all the more under his caresses. She felt as the lamb might feel as the butcher pats its head and runs his fingers approvingly through its woolly fleece.

"You must not misunderstand me, Mary, dear," he said. "You and Harold are each entirely left to follow your own inclinations. I have thought it my duty to make you aware that I would throw no barrier in the way. You would be the fairest of all the Ladies

Earlsfield, my love," he added, stooping and kissing her forehead, "and there have been Court beauties among them. But I have startled you, I fear. You had better not agitate yourself by saying anything just now, but go to your own room, and remember that I can have no wish for the daughter of my old friend, Philip Donne, except her dearest happiness;" and he led her gently to the door, and opened it for her, leaving Mary to go up-stairs with the sentence of lifelong misery ringing in her ears.

She reached her own room, and locked the door almost unconsciously, and then threw herself upon her bed, burying her face among the pillows. Her tears dried up. Terror of impending fate had cut off their source, and her hot head was like to burst, while she felt an utter vacancy where her heart should have been.

It was too cruel to be thus compelled to marry one whom she had never seen, and whom every one except his father did not scruple to declare to be subject to periods of

madness. Mrs Firebrace had declared that they would not be safe in the house with Harold—the man to whom Lord Earlsfield proposed to marry her. She had not been deceived by his assertion that he would exercise no influence upon her inclination. He had said that no earthly event would give him the same satisfaction as her marriage to Harold, and she knew by experience that all earthly events, at Earlscourt at least, must be ordered for his satisfaction. She had been alarmed and distressed by the way George Colpoys had spoken to her, but that was a light matter compared with the misery of marrying his insane nephew. A light matter! It would be perfectly tolerable, she told herself, to be compelled to marry George Colpoys compared with the other. Why had not George asked her directly to be his wife, and why had she not accepted him? she wildly asked herself. Then she could have told Lord Earlsfield that she was already engaged, and however angry he might have been, there

would have been an end of the difficulty about Harold. She reproached herself, and she reproached George, for not having saved her from this worse than death. Death! If she could only die, all would be well; but that would take time, and Harold Colpoys was to arrive to-morrow.

No; there was no hope. The future held no possibility of escape open to her. Lord Earlsfield had evidently made up his mind, and when he resolved to have anything done, done it must be. He evidently was seeking to secure her happiness and Harold's also. Of that Mary was quite confident, for she both loved and trusted her guardian. And if she could not see that her happiness lay in the direction which Lord Earlsfield pointed out, no doubt it was her ungrateful and wicked nature which perverted her mind. It never entered into Mary Donne's head to rebel against Lord Earlsfield's decree. She knew well that some terrible judgment would surely follow such an act of disobedience. Had not

Colonel Colpoys taken his own way against the will and in spite of the counsels of his eldest brother, and was he not suffering the most grievous social calamities in consequence? Earlscourt was Mary's microcosm, and her generalisations could only go so far as it afforded her experiences. But she certainly could not, would not disobey, and nothing was left her but to weep in secret over her hard lot.

Mary Donne did not appear at the dinner-table that evening. She sent her love to Mrs Firebrace with a message that she had a headache, and had gone to bed. The member could not stifle a feeling of guilty remorse when he recalled the scene in the summer-house, and he mentally cursed his selfishness for having made Mary ill and unhappy. Lord Earlsfield, too, was not without some mental qualms, but he sternly negatived the suggestion of the ladies that the doctor should be sent for, and ordered that Miss Donne should not be disturbed. He was more than usually morose and ill-tempered, and retreated

from the dinner-table even before the ladies rose, ordering tea to be sent to him in the library. Lord Earlsfield was not much better company when he was alone with his conscience. It was from no sudden impulse that he had broached the scheme of his son marrying Mary Donne. He had thought over the matter for some years back, and he had fortified his resolution with numerous irresistible arguments both moral and religious. But somehow these arguments failed to have their previous satisfying effect, now that he had actually informed the girl of her destiny. He had been quite positive that he was going to act rightly and kindly towards all parties; why, then, should he permit himself to think that there was anything wrong in his plan? He had promised Philip Donne that he would be a father to his girl; and was he not going to make her his daughter in reality? Certainly he was; but he did not care to raise his eyes to that part of the wall where the portrait of Colonel Donne was looking down upon him.

"Poor girl!" he said, walking uneasily up and down the room; "of course she must be agitated. Marriage is always a serious thought to any sensible person. But she must see it is all for the best. I could get scores of excellent matches for Harold in the peerage, and people would think me no more than prudent in selecting a wife for him from his own class. Why should I fret myself so much about my special motives in marrying him to Mary? She is good and kind and clever, and will help him in his peculiar circumstances through life better than any one else. She will be a peeress — perhaps the mother of a future Earl—an Earl of Earlsfield, and there are very few women that such rank would not count with. I might have my choice of Lady Lockington's daughters, or of the Countess of Elsedale's for that matter, for the settlements I shall make on Mary Donne. Ay, and then they would shut him up in an asylum as soon as my head was down, and he would be known as

the mad Lord Earlsfield. But with Mary Donne as his wife there need be no danger of that—no exposure—no scandal. And his children may be sane enough; there is no madness among the Colpoyses; or may break out only among the younger sons, which would be of no consequence, and a cheap way of providing for them."

"Only let us get over this link—this weak link," sighed his lordship, "and the chain may still be strong enough to bear the weight of the title through long generations. It must be so. I *have* done well. No one can say that I am acting selfishly in this matter."

He raised his eyes to Colonel Donne's portrait, and looked for a minute or two steadily at the face in the soft lamplight; but the features were keenly critical, with a half-doubtful, half-scornful expression, just as Sir Francis Grant had caught them; and Lord Earlsfield turned away with another sigh and threw himself down to muse in his chair.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MEMBER IN THE BOROUGH.

THERE were no idle men in Earlsport, or at least none with sufficient independence of character to avow the fact of having nothing to do, where almost every man had some pursuit to follow. The magistrates had their forenoons taken up with public business or their own offices; the merchants had to go to the Exchange; and bankers and lawyers were tied to their desks until luncheon-time at the earliest. People in Earlsport walked about briskly in the forenoon, and did not care about being button-holed unless one had really something urgent to say. No one with a character as a business man to lose ventured

into the club before one o'clock. Even Charley Hanmer, the alderman's son, who was regarded as the typical Tommy Idle of the town, went down to the wharf at half-past ten, and shut himself up in a wooden box with a pen behind his ear and a newspaper or a novel on his desk until the sun had passed the meridian; while men retired from the more active duties of their professions, like Colonel Ogle, who might have had a fair excuse for reposing upon his military laurels, went into Earlsfield Square and sat upon the Boards of Coal, or Steam Navigation, or Banking Companies. Perhaps the only prominent man in Earlsport who brazened his idleness publicly was Ned Horseley; and even he usually showed his respect for public prejudice by remaining indoors of a morning, except when some excuse suggested itself for paying a visit to Traill's Horse Bazaar, where he could always manage to idle away a few hours with a good conscience.

George Colpoys, when he set out for Earls-

port on the forenoon of the day when the heir of the House of Earlsfield was to arrive, was well aware of the business habits of the citizens, and that it was very doubtful whether he should meet with any man as much at leisure as himself to help him through the hours until it was time for him to join his lordship at the station. Lord Earlsfield, in the exultation of his heart at his son's arrival, had that morning given George a comfortable cheque as an earnest of his interest in his canvass for the next election, and had dropped a hint at breakfast that it was high time for the member to be bestirring himself among his constituents. Harold was expected by the half-past one train, and Lord Earlsfield was to meet him at the station. George might accordingly devote the morning profitably to looking up people in the borough, join them at the station, and drive home with them to lunch.

This suggestion recommended itself to the member, for Mary Donne had come down to

breakfast looking ill and dispirited, and with black circles round her eyes; and George, imagining himself the cause, was smitten with remorse, and felt that he could not again face her just then. Both Mrs Firebrace and Dorothy were full of commiseration for Mary's altered looks, but their sympathies were sternly repressed by the head of the house, who gruffly remarked that their croakings were enough to make any one ill; but he himself showed marked tenderness to Miss Donne. All this made George uneasy, and he readily grasped at Lord Earlsfield's recommendation to take a turn among the electors.

George Colpoys had no overweening pride in his own abilities as a canvasser, or in the disposition of the Earlsport citizens to listen to his blandishments. When the push came, the brunt of the battle had to be sustained by Mr Mold, or an electioneering agent from London, in whose hands George became merely a passive instrument, going where they told him and saying what they bade. But when

next election came, the tussle would be more severe than ever it had been before. A large number of the electors wanted a more advanced representative than a Whig of the Earlscourt school. They all detested Lord Earlsfield's stiffness and domineering ways towards the borough, and were ready to seize upon any feasible pretext for rebellion. If George Colpoys could stand upon his own merits, of which he certainly had no very high opinion himself, he might perhaps hope to unite the Whig and Liberal interest in his favour; but any goodwill that people might feel towards himself personally would not go far to counterbalance the general detestation in which the mansion of Earlscourt was held by the borough.

So the member set out without much elation of spirit, albeit money made his pockets warmer than usual, but with the satisfaction of thinking that a ramble through the town would help him to pass the forenoon somehow. He decided against taking his terrier, as calculated

to detract from the political importance of his visit, and, contrary to wont, he substituted an umbrella for the walking-stick that he had at first taken up, as an appurtenance more in keeping with his character as a statesman.

"It is certainly more parliamentary," reflected George, with a sigh; "if I had had a cotton one, it might have had a better effect—more business-like;" and he actually threw away a half-smoked cigar as he entered the town, a piece of extravagance he would never have been guilty of on an errand of less moment.

There were few people in Earlsfield Square at that hour of the day, and these seemed too much preoccupied with their own affairs to discuss the destinies of the empire. Nevertheless, George did his best, as far as raising his hat and waving his hand went, to ingratiate himself with his supporters. He managed to fasten on to Cobbinshaw, the local manager of the Metropolitan and Rural Bank, who was stout and puffy, and whom the member found

at the west entrance to the Square, exhausted with his walk up the steep street from the Exchange. Mr Cobbinshaw was a Radical, and an open foe to Earlscourt influence; but he was out of breath, and had no choice but to listen to George Colpoys's gracious civilities. These were mostly of a general character, for the time had not yet come for the serious subject of the election to be formally broached. He spoke glibly of Mr Cobbinshaw's son's success at Oxford, believed he would make a figure at the bar, supposed they would have him in Parliament some day, and quoted at length Lord Earlsfield's praise of Mr Cobbinshaw's pair of carriage-horses—a commendation, it need hardly be said, wholly fictitious.

"I am going along to the station to pick up Lord Earlsfield," remarked George, with easy familiarity; "we are to meet his son, who comes home for good. I suppose the youngster will soon be about among you, and I hope he will keep up the good old feeling between Earlscourt and the town. Terrible chap for

science he is—give points to most—most engineers;" and shaking Mr Cobbinshaw warmly by the hand, the member was off before the bank manager had got his wind sufficiently to make any reply.

"The old rascal," mused George; "I believe he is at the bottom of half the mischief against us in the 'Mercury.' But they shan't say that I ain't civil to every one. I might put over half an hour with Mold now, if he would not go on about these infernal bills."

Mr Mold was in the office, and in his private room, but the clerks were not certain that he was not engaged. However, the member readily volunteered to find out for himself. Mr Fossebraye occupied a small den in the immediate vicinity of the clerks and the counting-room which had been assigned to him in his father's days, and which he had never thought of changing when he became head of the firm; but Mr Mold, as the legal oracle of the establishment and the upholder

of its prestige, had apartments up-stairs, where it was supposed that he applied himself to the weightier matters of the law, undisturbed by the routine and racket of current business. George Colpoys knocked at a door covered with red cloth and studded with brass nails, suggestive of the important and confidential nature of the business transacted inside, and receiving no invitation to enter, knocked again. At last he was gruffly told to come in, and, opening the door, he found Mr Mold *tête-à-tête* with Miss Sparshott, who was seated in the client's chair, while the lawyer stood facing her with his back to the fire.

"I beg pardon," said George, bowing to the lady; "I had no idea you were engaged. I'll look in again."

"On no account," returned Mr Mold, rolling his eyes as he looked from Cloete to the member, and back again from the member to Cloete; "I am quite at your service. I believe, Miss Sparshott, that you now feel assured that the matter will be satisfactorily

arranged, and that you need give yourself no further trouble about it."

"I am so much obliged to you," said Cloete in a low tone, as she rose and prepared to leave; "then you think I need say nothing to Mr Fossebraye?"

"Certainly not," replied Mr Mold, as he accompanied her to the door, and held her hand as he added in a low voice, "it is not so much legal advice as knowledge of the world that is of service in an affair of this kind, and Mr George is somewhat apt to be rash and impetuous—with the best intentions of course, my dear Miss Sparshott—always with the best intentions. But it will be pleasure to me to give you my advice when anything of the kind occurs, and you may make your mind easy that I will not allow any trouble to befall you or your father. Good morning, my dear Miss Cloete, good morning;" and pressing her hand with more warmth, as it seemed to the member, than a business consultation called for, Mr Mold

bowed Cloete out of his room, and returned to greet Mr Colpoys, with his eyes blinking and twirling as if he had just come out of a dazzling light.

"I had no idea law was such a pleasant pursuit," said George, throwing himself into Mold's own chair, which was the easiest one in the room. "I should rather enjoy having pretty clients like your friend who has just gone out call upon me of a morning."

Mr Mold smirked and grinned as he sat down opposite George, and remarked that it was Sparshott the naturalist's daughter. "Her father is always in difficulties about money, and there was a writ issued the other day against him."

"Ah! and you play the *rôle* of benevolent protector. It is quite refreshing to find a vein of sentiment in a hardened old sinner like you. I suppose you don't allow smoking in this boudoir of yours, where you receive ladies by themselves in the forenoon."

Mr Mold did not encourage the idea, for his

private room was very nattily, not to say elegantly, furnished. Evidences of legal drudgery were few and far between. There was a light walnut writing-table in the centre of the room, with little piles of law-papers neatly folded and docketed lying about on it; an ink-stand, silver-topped and silver-stoppered; a carved ivory paper-cutter, and some tastefully cut crystal paper-weights. Some prettily framed pre-Raphael publications of the Arundel Society hung on the walls, and on the mantelpiece were two bronzes, flanking a time-piece with a richly chased silver dial. A vase of freshly gathered flowers stood on a little table in the window recess. The chairs were all easy and inviting, and there was a luxurious couch on which Mr Mold might repose when overstrained by his exertions. No one knew better than Mr Mold that the world—that is, the part of it contained in Earlsport and Elsedale; for Beechborough, proud of its own solicitors, was sceptical of his capacity, and the leading attorney of Muddleham frankly

expressed his conviction that "Mold was an old humbug"—that the world in which he lived and moved regarded him as the main-stay of the house of Fossebraye & Mold, as the master-mind that infused itself into the business and made up for the dulness of his partner. His intellect, as every one admitted, and as Mr Mold himself did not seek to conceal, was necessary to keep things going, and there was all the more need to take care of it. George Fossebraye could do the drudgery, and indeed had to do it, but Mr Mold knew the value of his own razors too well to cut blocks with them.

"I'm electioneering," said the member, "or at least I'm dangling after the electors in a sneaking way. I suppose you couldn't put a fellow up to any tips for popularity?"

"So you are positively going to stand again," returned Mr Mold, drily; "you will have your work cut out for you this time, for they are certain to put an Advanced Liberal into the field. But I suppose my lord pays,

whatever befalls. But what do you propose to do with yourself if you are beaten? Not an unlikely event, I am sorry to say, Mr Colpoys."

"In that case I shall marry and settle down," drawled George, stretching his legs lazily across the hearth-rug.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mr Mold, brightening up; "are you serious? It is certainly the best thing you can do; and if your marriage depends upon your defeat, I shan't say that I shall be sorry to see the Earlsfield colours go to the wall this time. But are you really serious? Have you any one specially in your eye?"

"I have," replied George, sententiously.

"Of course she must have a fortune. You can't afford to marry money merely; you must marry wealth."

"I have heard that the lady has two hundred yearly from her mother's estate; but I am not sure of it. Indeed I haven't made any inquiries."

"Great heavens!" cried Mr Mold, rolling his eyes more wildly than ever. "But of course you're joking. You couldn't do it. It would be absolutely impossible."

"No?" said George, interrogatively; "what just and lawful impediment could you declare? Of course a man may not marry his grandmother, and so on; but I don't recollect that a woman with only two hundred a-year is in the list of the prohibited."

"O Lord!" groaned Mr Mold, staring at the serious and impassive face of the member; "but of course you are only jesting. How could you pay your debts? How could you pay *me*, Mr Colpoys?"

"Ah!" said George, gravely, "those are just the questions that I can't find answers for myself. I have carefully considered the situation, and I can't see that it presents very brilliant prospects, either of subsistence for myself, or of remuneration for my creditors. But you are such a clever clear-headed fellow that you may be able to show me a way

out of the hole. That is why I have told you. Where do you get these very pretty flowers of yours?"

The distortions of Mr Mold's eyes were terrible to look at as he hurriedly opened a drawer in his writing-table and took from it a red-bound memorandum-book; but the member, quite undisturbed by his agitation, lazily took down one of the bronze centaurs and began to examine it with a critical interest.

"There is nine and eight is seventeen—nineteen—twenty-three," said Mr Mold, running his eye and little finger hastily along a column; "two thousand three hundred pounds, Mr Colpoys."

"Odd shillings and odd pence, if I remember rightly," put in the imperturbable member.

"Two thousand three hundred pounds," repeated Mr Mold impressively, and disdaining to refer to the shillings and pence. "How can you talk of marrying without money when you have such a sum as that

to repay me? I consider that you are bound by your honour, apart altogether from the obligation of your acceptance. Haven't I always befriended you in your straits? And but for my assistance your Jew discounters would have gone to Lord Earlsfield long ago."

"Just put past that memorandum-book, or, as you have got it out, let us add another two hundred to the indictment. Two-five is ever so much more easily recollected than two-three, and a couple of hundreds would come handy to me just now."

Mr Mold restored the book to its drawer as hastily as he had taken it out, locked it, and put the key in his waistcoat-pocket. "I don't understand what you mean. If you are joking, I would rather you chose some other subject where money is not concerned. It is hard enough to come by, and I am too poor a man to be able to jest with the prospect of losses."

"Heaven forgive the man! I am as innocent of jesting as I am of having a hundred

pounds in gold in my breeches-pocket at this present moment."

"Then you mean to marry a woman without money if you lose your seat?"

"I would like to do so; but there are a hundred and fifty obstacles in the way, any one of which will probably prevent me."

"Do you mean to pay me my money?"

"Most assuredly I do, although there is probably an equal number of impediments in the way in this case also."

"I scarcely understand," said Mr Mold, leaning back in his chair, and pressing his hands upon his forehead, "whereabouts we are. Of course I have every confidence in your honour so far as I am concerned; and it is for your own sake that I am anxious you should do nothing rash."

"Thank you, Mold; that is very handsomely said," returned George, with an ironical bow.

"Still I must say," continued the lawyer, turning the whites of his eyeballs outwards,

"that I would like if we could come to some definite arrangement about those bills. If we could think of some good collateral security now, it would make both our minds easier, wouldn't it?"

"It would indeed," said George; "for then I might add that two hundred I want so much."

"Of course your prospects are not altogether bad: we all know the painful affliction which hangs over the next heir to Earlscourt. If anything happened to Lord Earlsfield, and his son were found incapable of managing his affairs, the administration of the estates and property would naturally fall to you."

"I won't hear a word about that," broke in George, in a tone of more decision than he had hitherto used.

"Well, well," rejoined Mr Mold, "we won't allude to that, though you may be sure our friend Davis in Dover Street discounted that eventuality when he renewed our last bill."

"The infernal rascal!" cried George, ris-

ing in wrath; "if I thought he had any such notions in his head, I would go straight to Lord Earlsfield and tell him everything, and tell him to take up the bill. Does he, or you either, think that I am such a scoundrel as to speculate on the misfortunes of my own family?"

"I beg your pardon," apologised Mr Mold; "I should have known that the matter was too delicate to be discussed. But wouldn't Miss Colpoys help you at a pinch?"

"No, she won't—or she can't, as she says, for I have been to her already. She told me the other day she had anticipated her next quarter."

"And yet she has a large income," observed the lawyer, casting a penetrating look towards George, and speaking half reflectively. "Has it never seemed strange to you that a lady of Miss Colpoys's quiet tastes should manage to get through so much money?"

"I am not helping her now, you may take my word for it."

"Would you like to know where it goes?" said the lawyer suddenly, with an air of intelligence.

"No, I wouldn't," said the member, taking up his hat; "not unless she chooses to tell me herself. She won't help me, and that is all I have to do with it; and I don't see that it is any business of yours to pry into Miss Colpoys's affairs. How provoking you are, Mold! I came in here to have a lounge and a quiet pleasant chat with you, and you worry me about money and about my family, and the deuce knows what, until all my good-humour is fairly gone. How am I to go about and make myself pleasant to electors after having been badgered by you in this fashion?"

"No, no," said Mr Mold; "I did not want to worry or annoy you in any way. You know how anxious I always am to serve you. Our interests are so closely mixed up together that we can't afford to get angry with one another. Is it not so, Mr George?"

The member winced and shrugged his shoulders. "I wish, then, you could manage that two hundred for me, Mold."

"I will think about it, Mr Colpoys," returned the lawyer, hastening to open the door for his visitor. "I will do my best. I'll let you know about it the next time I see you;" and he seized George's hand and bowed him out, lest the member might take advantage of his complaisance to insist upon an immediate accommodation.

"I haven't done much good there," said George, as he made his way down-stairs. "I wish I saw any way of squashing those bills of Mold's. I wonder if they could be lumped up in the election expenses. No; I am afraid Earlsfield would not stand that. But he is a shady personage, Mr Mold is, even for me, and I must get him squared somehow or other."

Mr Mold's musings were not of a more amiable cast. "I must have my money somehow or other. The fellow is a fool—

an utter fool — just the sort of man who would marry a girl without sixpence if the whim took him. It is the only piece of extravagance and folly that he has not already committed. But where is he to get funds to pay me? That is the question. His sister, to be sure, is good for any amount; but how to work her? If I act on my own account — black-mail — faugh! an ugly expression; but Master George can turn the screw without any insinuation, and he shall be made to do it. And then he shall pay me, and more than pay me, without any demur. But he must get more rope."

And then Mr Mold sat down at his desk and wrote to the Honourable George Colpoys, M.P., Earlscourt, saying that he much regretted that there had been any unpleasantness between them with regard to money matters, and that he hastened to enclose a cheque for the sum Mr Colpoys had mentioned, and would be glad to take in return his acceptance at three months' date. This

he hoped would convince Mr Colpoys of the deep interest he, Mr Mold, took in Mr Colpoys's affairs, and remove all recollections of any hasty words that might have passed between them.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE HEIR-APPARENT.

NOTWITHSTANDING the aversion in which the Earlsport opposition professed to hold their lord of the manor, the incidents of the day were of too great local moment not to cause some commotion in the town; and by five o'clock, when people had begun to congregate about the club, the member's visit to the borough and the arrival of the heir-apparent were subjects ripe for discussion in all their bearings. Earlsport had not yet attained the dignity of an evening paper, and any one who was in possession of a piece of news readily found a hearing. The arrival of Lord Earlsfield's son was an event of such

importance that all the facts connected with it had been carefully observed and put together. The older generation, who remembered the time when the influence of Earlscourt was felt in every corner of the town, when no new undertaking could be ventured upon without first securing Lord Earlsfield's patronage, and when the Earlscourt family birthdays, marriages, and comings of age were as duly celebrated as if they had been statutory festivals,—the older generation felt uneasy at the altered state of affairs, and were vaguely nervous lest some calamitous judgment might be drawn down upon the town. The men of the opposition, on the other hand, were triumphant. The utter indifference which had been shown to the arrival of the Honourable Harold Colpoys was to them an earnest of the overthrow of the remainder of his lordship's power, and the beginning of requital for all the wrongs which they charged Lord Earlsfield with having inflicted upon the prosperity of the borough.

When it was known that the young heir was coming to reside in his ancestral home, some timid suggestions had been made by the few who still stood up for Lord Earlsfield of a public reception, and George Fossebraye had gone the length of cautiously sounding the members of the corporation. But the reception his proposal met with was not very encouraging; and though Lord Earlsfield's friends and dependants were still numerous enough to provide a fair display of flags and triumphal arches, and even to get up a banquet at the White Hart, yet this would only serve to demonstrate the number of dissentients and the low ebb to which the Earlscourt influence had fallen in the borough. Mr Loxdale, the leader of the opposition, and the owner of all the town that did not belong to Lord Earlsfield, had firmly set his face against any ovation. "If there are no arches there will be no brickbats," Loxdale had grimly told George Fossebraye. "If I were a friend of Lord Earlsfield's I would

not select the return of this poor young fellow as a proper occasion for calling out an expression of feeling in Earlsport;" and George had to give up in despair. But Loxdale, on his side, suppressed the able editorial which Mr Perkins had penned for next morning's 'Mercury,' in which, *apropos* of his arrival, the unhappy mental state of the young heir of Earlscourt was characterised as the normal condition of youthful scions of the aristocracy — the natural result of paternal depravity, maternal imbecility, and a righteous retribution on a class which battened upon the land, the fruits of which they denied to those who produced them.

Thus the two forces in Earlsport were neutralised, and Lord Earlsfield was allowed to drive unnoticed to the Court with his son beside him, thinking ruefully of days when the horses would have been taken out, and willing arms have dragged the carriage along the avenue under the old elms up to the very door of the manor-house.

But in spite of these mortifications, it was great consolation to have got his son home again, and to mark the manifest improvement in the young man's appearance since he had last seen him. Harold Colpoys was a tall slim youth, rather delicate in build, but well set up, and looking, as his father fondly assured himself, every inch a gentleman. He was quiet and nervous in manner, and his quick hazel eyes, which were somewhat deeply sunk in his face, seemed to change in expression with every different feeling that came over him. At the first glance one might have hastily set him down as weak and pliable; but he had inherited his father's square chin and hard firm mouth, which indicated a probability of persistence and obstinacy. Indeed some of the worst mental states connected with the recurrence of his malady had been induced by the necessity of thwarting him on projects on which he had firmly set his mind. "Use the utmost caution in opposing him when he has fixedly set his mind on any-

thing," had been Captain Carshalton's farewell recommendation to Lord Earlsfield: "he will readily listen to reason; but he has decided views of his own, is impatient of conventional considerations, and can argue himself into such a firm position that any attempt at contradiction is invariably attended by painful results." And Lord Earlsfield had made up his mind to be guided by this advice, although it was by no means to his taste to have to study the inclinations of another instead of having all men follow his own. But as Harold Colpoys sat by his father and uncle, while the carriage rolled towards Earlscourt, there was no suspicion of mental weakness about him; and if he showed a little diffidence and uneasiness, Lord Earlsfield, who liked modesty in young men, thought these traits only natural and becoming under the circumstances.

"I hope you did not expect to be received in state," Lord Earlsfield was saying with a pleasant smile, at the point where we shall

take up their conversation. "We are very advanced people here in Earlsport, and have quite done with feudalism and aristocracy and all such rubbish, ever since our friend of the 'Mercury' showed us the error of our ways."

"We shall change all that," said the member, pleasantly, "now that Harold is come home. He must go about the town, and be affable and make friends. To tell the truth, your father has kept them at the staff's end rather much. But if you go about pleasantly among them, and take the chair at meetings now and then, and show an interest in the races—without encouraging betting, of course," added George, with severe virtue,—"a man who interests himself in pure sport, apart from any spirit of gambling, is a power for good on the turf; and if, in a word, you are civil with the Earlsportians, you'll soon make an easy conquest of them."

"Your uncle's advice is valuable. No one is better qualified to advise on the subject—

from a negative standpoint," said Lord Earlsfield, with a rusty smile.

"I shall only be too glad to make myself useful in any way my father and you can point out," replied Harold; "I detest idleness. But I have never yet done anything in public; and I am afraid I should feel very nervous at making the attempt."

"Not a bad feeling to have," observed Lord Earlsfield, benignantly. "Canning, whom I have met when I was a boy, was a nervous man. He always spoke best when he was most nervous at the beginning. But Canning was in the Lower House——" and here Lord Earlsfield was carried away into questioning within himself whether there was any real reason why this very presentable and sensible young man, who was nervous, and might therefore become a great orator, should not find a seat in the Commons until the time came for taking his place among his peers.

The member felt that the conversation was making a perilous approach to the question of

his seat. "Are you still as fond of your scientific studies as you were?" he asked his nephew. "You mustn't blow the roof off the Court, as you nearly did to the old inn at Lussenbach. Gad! I remember what a state old Strumpff, the landlord, got into when your chemicals went off. He must have thought he had got the Devil and Dr Faustus in the house."

"Oh, but I am much more careful now; and besides, I have got much more experience," said Harold, laughing. "You mustn't frighten my father into refusing me some hole for a laboratory at the Court. I had to break off some very interesting experiments on the spectrum of carbon when I came away from Germany. Do you know, sir," he added, turning to his father, "they have made me a Fellow of the Chemical Society."

"We must get you put up for the Royal Society," replied Lord Earlsfield, who had no doubts in his own mind that that body at least was one with which his son might be

creditably connected. "I shall speak to the Marquis of Muddleham about it. He is a scientific man too, and has invented a new manure."

"He brought a sample of it into Brookes's in a snuff-box one day, and old MacGuffog, the member for the Lochaber Burghs, who is as deaf as a post, was going to take a pinch of it. But talking of science," George added, as the horses slackened their speed as they approached the open gate of Earlscourt Park, "there is the man for you. That old fellow has got more science under his rusty hat than a whole British Association - full," and the member nodded genially to Dr Sparshott, who was coming along the road with a bundle of damp unwholesome-looking weeds wrapped up in an old newspaper, and his hands as usual too full to raise his hat in acknowledgment of George Colpoys's salutation.

"Who *is* that?" inquired Lord Earlsfield sternly, putting up his eyeglasses to examine the person whose external appearance did so

much injustice to pursuits which his son had dignified by engaging in.

"He is old Sparshott, the curator of the Museum," returned the member; "I thought you must have known him, as you are its patron."

"Humph," said Lord Earlsfield, drily, "a man who, I am afraid, has never done any good. An able doctor I am told—might make a very respectable livelihood if he were to apply himself to his profession, instead of being little better than a showman. Sad trial for the vicar. You must make the vicar's acquaintance, Harold. We have him regularly once a-year to dine at Earlscourt."

Harold turned round to look after the Doctor's shambling figure, with rather more appearance of interest than he had yet shown; but the carriage had now turned into the park, and was driving rapidly up to the entrance of Earlscourt.

Here, as if to make up for the coldness of the reception in Earlsport, the whole array of

servants were duly drawn up at the head of the steps, with Douce the steward, and Pullar the butler, at their head. The banner of the Colpoys family, blazoning 1st and 4th three maunches *gules* for Colpoys, 2d and 3d a row galley, sails furled *sable*, for Swayne, drooped over the entrance; and on the steps stood the ladies of the house waving their handkerchiefs. Douce led off a hearty cheer as the carriage came inside, which was again raised with redoubled force as the coachman brought round his horses, pulling them up with such vigour as to nearly throw them on their haunches. Lord Earlsfield descended graciously, followed by his son, who tried to smile nervously to the bowing domestics; while the member, with an air of easy benignity, as if he felt perfectly satisfied with the whole proceedings, brought up the rear.

Harold cordially kissed his aunt Dorothy, whom he warmly loved; shook hands with Mrs Firebrace, whose appearance awed him

too much for him to take the liberty of a similar salute; and looked in nervous embarrassment at the third lady, whom Lord Earlsfield took by the arm and led forward, pale and trembling, from behind Mrs Firebrace.

"My dearest ward and almost daughter, Mary Donne," he said; "my son Harold;" and he spoke with such suppressed emotion that he seemed with difficulty to restrain himself from stretching his hands over them in paternal benediction. George Colpoys's easy smile vanished; and, checking something that would probably have sounded like an oath, he strode into the hall and disappeared.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE.

Cloete Sparshott sat by her writing-table, her face half-buried in her hands. An open letter lay before her, as well as a blank sheet of note-paper, on which her eyes were fixed in a steady reverie. Through the half-opened lower sashes of the window the breeze came in from the sea with a bracing, salty relish. It played round her hot flushed cheeks, stirred her loosely tied hair, and fluttered the ends of the simple pink ribbon that was tied round her neck, as if it would like to fan the fair face that looked so sad and troubled. Mechanically she stretched out her hand and took hold of a pen, but

the act only served to recall to her her irresolution. She turned and looked fixedly out of the window, but her eyes did not take in the view that was to be seen over the crowded chimneys and house-tops—the vista of the Earlsport bar, and the line of white breakers tumbling over it, with the long sweep of wave-beaten sands stretching away in a wide curve to the point where a rampart of rugged cliffs stood up to check the full force of the German Ocean. None of these did her eye take in, but her glance rested on a cluster of green tree-tops which, barely rising above the ridges of the sand-hills, marked where the Dunes House lay hidden. Then with a deep sigh she turned away, and taking up the letter that lay before her, slowly re-read its contents.

The letter was from our friend Mr Mold, but it had no formidable legal look about it. It was not written on blue paper, nor did a "*Re*" preface its contents; but it was a neat little gilt-edged note, with a

suspicion of scent about the envelope, which bore Mr Mold's private device — a mailed hand grasping a prodigious battle-axe emblazoned in colours. It ran thus:—

"The Hermitage, *May* 23.

"My dear Miss Sparshott,—You were unfortunately out when I called yesterday about your father's affairs, which I regret to say are in a much more embarrassed and critical state than I had supposed; otherwise I should have spoken to you on a subject of the deepest importance to myself, and, I would fain hope, not without some interest to you.

"Dear Miss Sparshott, I ask you do you think me a man of stone?"—"No, of brass," groaned Cloete.—"Have we not for two or three years met constantly at the house of our amiable friend Mrs Fossebraye and elsewhere, and can you have failed to notice my silent, my humble admiration of your beauty? No, I will not do your penetration

the injustice of supposing such a thing. You saw my love, and your angelic goodness would not have had the cruelty to witness it without checking my aspirations, had you destined these to end in disappointment."

"The wretch!" gasped Cloete, as she struck the letter angrily on the table.

"Dearest Miss Sparshott," Mr Mold went on, "I love you fondly, truly, and devotedly. Immersed in the anxieties of business all my life, and struggling to place myself in the excellent position that I have now attained, I have never before exposed myself to the influences of a tender passion. It is a virgin love I offer you, pure and true as your own. There are years not a few of difference between us, but they are on the right side. In me you will find a most affectionate husband, who will be able to place you in a social position which your charms are so

well qualified to adorn, and whose matured knowledge of the world and of business will ward off all difficulties from your flowery path."

"Absurd!" cried Cloete, with a stamp of her foot; "as if one married to have legal advice for nothing. Virgin love, indeed! He is fifty-five if he is a day."

"Darling Cloete, whatever you wish in the way of settlements that comes within my means, which I may inform you in confidence are very comfortable, shall be arranged entirely to your satisfaction. It will also be my care to extricate your excellent father from his pecuniary difficulties, which without some such intervention are likely speedily to land him in serious troubles. Take time, then, my dearest Cloete, and think well before you answer this note. Much depends upon your reply—much for you and for me, and for your estimable and learned parent. I

trust my cause to your admirable judgment, which will, I am sure, prompt you for the best.—Believe me to be, your devoted lover,

"THADDEUS MOLD.

"*P.S.*—I trust you will not leave me long in suspense, as Dr Sparshott's affairs are very pressing, and I am anxious to have my position with regard to him clearly defined, that I may without indelicacy interpose in them.—T. M."

Cloete again took the pen in her hand, while bitter tears ran down her cheeks. She had no doubt about the meaning of Mr Mold's letter. He proposed to marry her as the price of rescuing her father from his difficulties, which had too often given them trouble, and which now seemed from Mr Mold's letter to be more serious than ever. What these difficulties were Cloete knew little, and it was probable that Dr Sparshott had little more real comprehension of them than her-

self. Ugly-looking men swooped down upon them at certain intervals with bills signed by Dr Sparshott in their hands, and threats in their mouths of seizing their few effects, and even of throwing the Doctor into prison. The Doctor, as a rule, could meet his acceptances only by anathemas, which would not pass for current coin, and with bitter reminiscences of how in Ceylon or at the Cape he could have had the bailiffs beaten until they were as raw as Saint Bartholomews. It was quite useless to endeavour to get the Doctor to go calmly into his affairs. He would either fly into a passion and rush at his assailants, or he would bid Cloete pack up, and threaten to decamp and leave everything behind them. And Cloete had already been so much buffeted about the world that she knew the value of a home, even when that home had all the drawbacks connected with such a public place as the Museum.

Once when she had thought her heart was broken, in the old days when Stephen Brance-

peth had gone from her, and when she fancied that every one in the streets of Earlsport could read her forlorn condition in her face, she had wished that they might leave the town, might hide themselves anywhere, even in the regions of the Gaboon, whither the Doctor had once threatened to betake himself, and seek the more refined society of the *Troglodytes gorilla*, rather than put up with the officious impertinence of some bustling member of the Museum Committee. But Cloete now said to herself that she had learned wisdom since these days. Earlsport was her home, and though all was over between her and Stephen Brancepeth, she must plan for herself and her father to keep a house above their heads. It might be a stiff battle, but she must fight it for her father's sake.

As for Mr Mold's proposal, it was simply impertinence, and Cloete's anger rose at the idea that the man had been making her father's distresses a means of securing power over her. But the lonely life which she led

had given her considerable concentration of character, and when by herself, away from the disturbing eyes and presence of others, she could always summon a calm and determined resolution to her assistance.

"I have read something like this in novels," she said to herself, settling her lips firmly, and taking the pen once more in her hand; "but there the daughter has generally to sacrifice herself to the man to prevent her papa from going to prison. But I am not going to do that, and papa shall not go to prison. There is no danger of that, and they would very soon get tired of keeping him there. But then the scandal, and the Museum Committee. It might cost him his situation; but I shall fight against that. I must think what friends I ought to apply to; and first, let me strike Mr Mold out of the list."

She dipped her pen in the ink, and wrote :—

"Dear Sir,—I am as much surprised as pained by the letter you have sent me. If

you have taken advantage of my father's distresses to insult me——"

"No; that will not do. I need not make an enemy of even Mr Mold if I can help it. We may have to depend upon his forbearance. I might even——but no," she said, checking the half-thought, "I will not play with any man's feelings, even if he is as absurd and old as Mr Mold. I must write to him as politely and kindly as I can.

"There is mostly a prince in the fairy tales, or a rich young gentleman in the novels, who comes to the rescue," she sighed, as she again looked out of the window to the tree-tops waving over the Dunes House. "I know, too, where he might come from; but no. Stephen Brancepeth is the last person in the world from whom I could allow my father to receive assistance. 'I love you better than my own soul,' he said, 'but I can never ask you to be my wife.' And he asked to be my brother. My

husband, yes — a thousand times; but my brother — never, never." And she put her hands up to her hot forehead and buried her face in her palms.

"Here's tea, Miss Cloete," said the maid, entering with a tray; "why, bless you, you ain't a-crying! and what for? And here's the Doctor with young Lord Earlsfield and his carriage and two horses a-standing at the door. And they are coming up here, too, for the Doctor is speaking about some outlandish furrin things, and said as how he would show his lordship them when they went up-stairs to the study; only he said Mr Colpoys, and didn't call him his lordship as he oughter, for his father is the Right Honourable Lord Earlsfield, as my huncle was hunder hoverseer to his coal-pits for many a day; but then the Doctor is so careless. Goodness, mussy, drink your tea, Miss Cloete! till I put on my cap with the cherry ribbons."

"Voilà! Monseigneur le Prince!" ejacu-

lated Cloete, with a little laugh. "Why, Mary," she said, "Mr Colpoys must have come to see the Museum; he has just arrived at Earlscourt. My father would never think of bringing him up here. I suppose tea and thick bread-and-butter would not be much of a treat to his lordship, as you call him."

"Of course he is his lordship," reiterated Mary, indignantly; "oughtn't I to know, when my huncle was his father's hunder hoverseer? He is the Right Honourable the young Lord Earlsfield. And if they ain't a-coming up this blessed minute, and how ever am I to get past them!"

Sure enough the voice of the Doctor and his heavy tread were heard distinctly on the stairs. Cloete had just time to shut the blotter upon Mr Mold's letter and her unfinished reply; and Mary, standing behind the door, opened it so as to hide herself, and disappeared instantly, probably to make herself more presentable by donning her cap with the cherry ribbons.

"And now, sir," the Doctor was saying, "I shall show you some new species of *Lepidoptera Heterocera*, which I brought from the East with me. They have never been figured, and have only been described in my own memoir to the Zoological Society. I think of giving them to Professor Flower for the South Kensington Museum when I am done with them. Cloete, my dear, this is the Honourable Mr Colpoys, a young gentleman who has the rare good sense to fill his head with more important things than horse-racing or politics. My daughter, Miss Sparshott."

Harold Colpoys bowed, and smiled nervously, keeping his eyes fixed upon the young woman, whose colour rose at being thus suddenly brought into contact with a much greater person than had ever before condescended to visit them. She felt oppressed by a consciousness of the old and rumpled condition of her stuff gown, that she had no collar on, and that as she had been

abstractedly pushing her hands through her hair, it could not be lying smoothly. And here was this young man looking intently at her out of his melancholy eyes, which seemed immovably fixed upon her face.

But happily Dr Sparshott was in too great a bustle of high spirits at having got an appreciative listener of such distinction to allow this awkwardness to continue.

"If you will step through this way, my dear sir, to my little study," said the Doctor, "I shall show you the *Lepidoptera* and some other little matters which I daresay will interest you."

"The study!" cried Cloete, in alarm. "Oh no, father, it is in such an untidy state that you could never take any one into it. Let me warn you, Mr Colpoys, against entering that room. Papa will allow no one to touch it, and you will not find a chair that is free from fossils or bones, and there is scarce standing-room for books and specimens littering the floor."

"Stuff!" retorted the Doctor; "there is nothing to make a fuss about. But," he added, as the thought crossed his mind that his den *might* seem untidy to one who was but an amateur in science, and might perhaps frighten him from coming back again, "as Cloete seems nervous of exposing you to such an ordeal, if you will sit down here I shall bring out the specimens for you, and indeed the light in this room will better show you the points to which I wish to call your attention."

Harold Colpoys took a chair opposite to Cloete, from whom he did not seem able to remove his eyes, while his hands played nervously with his hat, and the Doctor bustled away to the study, where he could be heard rattling among cases and upsetting stands in his haste.

"You have only just returned to Earlscourt, Mr Colpoys?" said Cloete, taking up a piece of work. She had waited some time for him to break the silence, and after another look at

him had come to the conclusion that she was the less nervous of the two.

"Yes, I came home last week. This is my first visit to Earlsport. I am very fond of science; indeed it is almost the only thing I could ever learn or take an interest in. And I had heard so much of Dr Sparshott's collections that I was anxious to see them and make his acquaintance."

Harold had turned his eyes away while speaking, but as he finished he again fixed his gaze full on the girl's face.

From the inner sanctum muffled sounds of wrath began to be audible. "There has been cleaning. That slut Mary! Here is the tail of that skeleton gone! To the dust-bin doubtless. I'll be——"

"Papa is so glad to have any one take an interest in the Museum," broke in Cloete hurriedly, to drown the indiscreet language which she had good reason to fear would flow from the Doctor's room. "There are so few people here who look upon the Museum

as anything except a show-place; and it is rather trying when ignorant visitors come who expect to be shown over the place and told the names of things and all about them."

"It is infamous!" said Harold, warmly. "Dr Sparshott ought to be protected from such molestation. I shall speak to my father. I shall——" here he broke off suddenly, and fixed a rapt glance of admiration upon Cloete, which was not unnoticed by that discreet maiden, though she kept plying her needle with unusual diligence. Presently the Doctor bore down upon them, emerging from a cloud of dust which heralded his approach, his arms filled with glass bottles, which spread strong odours of spirits of wine through the apartment. These had all to be described, their special characteristics, the story of their acquisition; the idiotic blunders which other naturalists had made regarding them to be exposed; and the new theories with which the Doctor meant to enlighten the world to be indicated. Dr Sparshott only

wanted a silent listener, which was fortunate, for young Colpoys kept his gaze steadily fixed on Cloete all the while, his hands nervously fingering now this specimen, now that, instead of his hat, which he had laid aside to handle the Doctor's treasures. He roused himself at times to make a pertinent remark upon the subject before him; and so well pleased was the Doctor, that when he had exhausted the specimens he proposed to fetch a fresh supply.

"But, father, you will bore Mr Colpoys," remonstrated Cloete; "see, you have already covered him with dust; and I am sure it is only his good-nature that makes him so patient."

"Well, well," said the Doctor, "to be sure we can go into things more fully another time. Now that we have got Mr Colpoys among us, we shall be able to do something more for science. We must have you as one of the trustees of the Museum, sir—who, I must say, are the most unmitigated set of idiots that are at large upon the face

of the inhabited globe," he added, in a growl. "Lord Earlsfield — well, Lord Earlsfield, to be sure, has so many important duties of his own to attend to — but he will find a worthy substitute in you;" and the Doctor, to Cloete's astonishment, actually made Mr Colpoys a courtly bow, an honour which she had never seen him pay to any one in her life before.

"I shall be very glad indeed," said Harold, rising. "I may come back, may I not?" he asked diffidently, of Cloete, though his eyes turned towards the Doctor.

"Papa, I am sure, will always be glad to see you," she said, cordially; "he finds so few who take an interest in his pursuits;" and she gave him her hand, which he took and held for a minute in his own; then letting it drop, with a suppressed sigh, he accompanied the Doctor down-stairs.

"So that is the Prince," mused Cloete, as she stood a little back from the window and watched the young man get into his carriage;

"he seems very nice, if he would not stare so at one. And my hair is all in a fuzz. They say he is not right sometimes; but there does not seem much the matter with him but shyness, poor boy! Poor boy, did I say? Why, he has come of age, and must be rather older than myself. Suppose he should fall in love with me. Suppose the moon were to fall down in the Square. Well, he can be a useful friend to papa if he gets Lord Earlsfield to interest himself in the Museum. Cloete, Lady Earlsfield! that *would* sound nice. Well, one thing is certain, that if I become Mrs Mold, I shall never be Lady Earlsfield; and so, my lady, smooth your hair, settle your wits, and see if you can write the man a sensible refusal that will not make him our enemy. Heigh-ho! the tea is cold, and that frugal Mary has cut the bread-and-butter terribly thick as usual."

She sat down again and began :—

"My dear Mr Mold,—I cannot say how vexed I was to read the sentiments that your

letter expresses towards me, as it is quite impossible that I can make you any return for them. I am sure that it is your good heart that has prompted you to offer to make me your wife, in pity of our distressed circumstances; but I cannot take advantage of your generosity. You have much too good sense and experience to entertain a serious passion for so young and poor a girl as I am——"

"But he may say he hasn't," and Cloete thoughtfully paused, "and press the matter again. I must put it more plainly."

"Besides, I could never marry any one whom I do not love, and to you I only feel deeply grateful for all the kindness you have done us, and respect for your character."

"Heaven forgive me for such hypocrisy, but it is for my father's sake!" Cloete mentally ejaculated.

"I trust you will not feel angry with me," she resumed, "and that I shall be able to consult you in our difficulties as if nothing of this had passed; and that you will not again mention this subject, which I assure you has caused me sincere sorrow.—Believe me to be, dear Mr Mold, yours very gratefully,

"CLOETE SPARSHOTT."

"Will it do?" said Cloete to herself, leaning forward over the letter, and supporting her brows on her hands. "It ought to be plain enough to him that he will get nothing by teasing me. And I have surely said nothing that can offend him. I might have told him that he was sixty, and more than half-blind. I might be a fright, for all he can see of any one. Yet I feel nervous about sending it."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BURDEN OF A SECRET.

The news that Stephen Brancepeth had joined his father in the bank provoked, as might have been expected, the comments of Earlsport gossips. The obstinate consistency of the old banker was so well known that few would have given him credit for the weakness of fatherly forgiveness; and though every one was obliged to admit that his conduct was only right and natural, his character somewhat suffered in consequence. Earlsport had enjoyed the interesting alienation of father and son, heightened as it had been by the unexpected return of the latter, and his evident independence of the banker, too

keenly to be altogether satisfied with a commonplace reconciliation to which it had been no party. Had old Mr Brancepeth given in upon his deathbed, Earlsport would both have understood and have been edified by the step; had he died unmitigated, and bequeathed his money to a charity, it would have been just what every one had expected. But here had father and son naturally and simply come together again, without any offer of explanation from either of them; and Earlsport could only shrug its shoulders over the event.

Of course there was much talk at the club and at dinner-tables. Dr Horniblow, who very rarely saw the banker, spoke much of Mr Brancepeth's declining mental powers, and of his own success in restoring the intellectual faculties of aged patients. Colonel Ogle, who was interested in the Metropolitan and Rural Bank, prophesied a speedy end to Brancepeth Brothers once the young partner got the business fairly into his hands. Charley Hanmer knew for certain that the younger

Brancepeth was amassing a colossal fortune by gambling in American railways, that he never lost, and that the old man had thought it worth while to take him into the bank to get a share of the plunder. And the ladies in general adopted Mrs Fossebraye's idea, that the quarrel between father and son had been a *ruse*, from first to last, to enable the young man to throw over Cloete Sparshott. George Fossebraye gave the most emphatic contradiction to the theory of his wife, who had become bitterly opposed to Stephen on her cousin's account; but although he was known to be more in Stephen Brancepeth's confidence than any one else, nothing was to be extracted from him. Mr Mold rolled his eyes and said nothing, and Squire Horseley impartially condemned all theories as confounded bosh.

Although it had not been without much reflection that Stephen Brancepeth had acceded to his father's proposal, his new duties at the bank, inexperienced as he was to them, came as a very decided relief from himself.

At the Dunes House he was eating out his heart by inaction. His doubtful position, the secret of his marriage, and his uncertainty about the future, all conspired to charm away the ease which he naturally loved, and make him fret with impatience for something to do next. His cultivated tastes, when he found himself solely dependent upon them to pass the time, became an intolerable burden. He was fond of desultory reading, and speedily disgusted himself by systematic indulgence in it. He was devoted to painting, and spoiled canvas after canvas until he lighted upon a proper subject. This found, the work of painting became unendurable. He wanted a stimulus; he wanted an aim; he wanted an object. Above all, he was wearied of his life; and but for his wife's earnest entreaties, he would have insisted upon an immediate disclosure of their secret, let the consequences be what they might.

And yet Stephen was by no means so indifferent to these consequences as his im-

patience would have him believe. He had felt poverty already with sufficient keenness to be haunted with that dread which possesses, even in the midst of prosperity, every one who has once smarted from it. Dorothy had little expectation of her brother's leniency; and from all that he knew of Lord Earlsfield, Stephen could have little doubt that his lordship would assert his rights against his sister. Dorothy had clearly forfeited her aunt's fortune. Even now Brancepeth could scarcely disguise from himself that he was living on a species of fraud; and though he sought to salve his conscience with the reflection that Lady Pye's will was a thoroughly unjust one, and that Lord Earlsfield's conduct in throwing interested objections in the way of Dorothy's marriage was absolutely inequitable, still the sense that his position was a false one preyed upon him night and day. True, he could tell himself he was not to blame; that he had urged on Dorothy from the first to de-

clare their marriage, and save him from the imputation of mercenary motives. Not only had she not done so, but she had resisted with prayers and tears all his entreaties that she would allow him to do so. Dorothy had always insisted that she should be allowed to choose a favourable opportunity for breaking the news to Lord Earlsfield, and had always postponed the evil day.

And yet, as Brancepeth had told himself, there was little call for him to upset present arrangements. If the ease and luxury which the possession of fortune assured him were gone, what remained? It was useless to disguise the fact that his feelings had cooled down considerably since the time when he had been able to meet Dorothy's ardent advances with what he believed to be love. In his weakness and despair, her kindness had idealised her into an angel, but the reality had not sustained the illusion. Familiarity fails to discover new beauties in ladies who are past their *première jeunesse*, and

those charms which have been once admired pall under the test of use and wont when there are no others to replace them. He could critically contemplate Dorothy's imperfections, and contrasts would suggest themselves, however loyally he might seek to banish them from his mind.

She had insisted upon him returning with her to Earlsport. She was not without jealousy, and did not relish the idea of her young husband, whom no one knew to be a married man, disporting himself at Biarritz or Trouville during the months she felt bound to spend at Earlscourt. Brancepeth had at first shrunk with horror from the ordeal. He realised the danger of again falling in the way of Cloete Sparshott, but he could not reveal to his wife how tender a point this was with him. He had told Dorothy truly the cause of his quarrel with his father; but he had led her to believe that his love was a boyish whim—past and done with. And when Dorothy had insisted, and had urged

the necessity of his being on the spot to support her when the inevitable disclosure of their marriage was made to Lord Earlsfield, he had felt in duty bound to yield to her wish. Perhaps at the bottom of his heart there lurked a desire to see Cloete once more, and to mingle with hers his grief over their parted destinies. Certainly he was not sorry that his father should see that his anger had failed to crush him, and that he was now independent of the bounty which had been so cruelly refused him. And so he had come to Earlsport, and everything had turned out in a way that he had been unable to foresee.

With Cloete he now felt himself more in love than ever. He wanted her society, her friendship, and above all her sympathy. She ought to know his new position, and in his heart he reproached Dorothy as the obstacle to frankness between them. He was a man of honour, he assured himself. He had married Dorothy, and would be true and faithful

to her. He would dutifully devote his life to loving and cherishing her. But he craved for something more. That oneness of soul which had been between him and Cloete would enable her to enter into his troubles, and comfort him in the difficulties which lay before him. Such sympathy as he desired was no doubt dangerous, but he felt himself equal to the ordeal. Even if he had felt less confident in his own integrity, Cloete's perfect purity was a sufficient guarantee. But he could not tell Dorothy this, and at times he dreaded the effect which the revelation might have upon Cloete herself. Might she not despise his inconstancy; the facility with which he had succumbed to circumstances—his drifting into a marriage without perfect love? And as he thought over the girl's character he felt at times inclined to shrink from the avowal of his marriage. Perhaps he was too selfish to understand that his attitude of mystery might still be fraught with possibilities of hope for Cloete. Per-

haps he clung to the idea that in her heart she might still take a tender interest in himself, and he shrank from the disclosure that would finally sever any remaining links of the chain that had once bound them together. Another consideration had hitherto kept Brancepeth from pressing too vehemently for the avowal of his marriage. The disparity of years between Dorothy Colpoys and himself would naturally expose him to the charge of having married her for her fortune. People might sneer at this in private, but it was too common an event, and too much in consonance with the usage of the world, to be safely scoffed at. But if, as seemed very possible, Lord Earlsfield should prove implacable, and Dorothy and himself should be left penniless, or, at the best, compelled to live upon a compassionate allowance from Earlscourt, with what ridicule would he not be assailed? He would be derided as a baffled fortune-hunter. And would he not be cast once more adrift upon the world,

with the additional incubus of a wife whose attractions were on the wane, and for whom he felt that his love was getting less assurable?

With his father's offer to join the bank, with the future secured position which the reconciliation offered, Brancepeth found his position entirely changed. His inherent instincts taught him that the loss of Dorothy's fortune was not a calamity to be despised; but still, supposing the worst happened, her money would not be of the same vital importance. They would be able to maintain a sufficient position. The Dunes House, though small, was yet an establishment which the penniless sister of a peer could not find fault with; and if Lord Earlsfield seized upon the fortune, he could not quarrel with the marriage that had thrown it into his hands. These ideas inspired Brancepeth with quite a new train of resolutions. He would give up drifting and dreaming. He would take life practically, and adapt himself to circum-

stances where he could not adapt circumstances to himself. He would work hard, and master the business of the bank; he would make himself indispensable to his father and secure of his inheritance; he would assert the influence which his position at the bank and his wife's rank ought to command in Earlsport society and beyond it. A seat in Parliament, a post in the Ministry, a baronetcy, were all within the range of possibility. And Brancepeth, as he canvassed the future, felt disgusted with the aimless dreamy life he had hitherto led. One resolution he resolved to follow: if Dorothy's fortune had to be surrendered, it should be given up with a good grace, and Lord Earlsfield's friendship if possible preserved. And now he was impatient that the news should be at once broken to his lordship.

But to immediate action Dorothy had strong objections. Her intense fear of her brother's anger paralysed her not less than the fear of

losing her money. She would undertake to tell Lord Earlsfield all; but they must wait —wait until a proper opportunity presented itself, when the news could be broached with least chance of evil consequences. She had hoped to have been able to speak to her brother when Harold's return had made him feel in an unusually amiable humour. But he had been so much engrossed with his son that she had never got a chance. But she would certainly tell him; she would watch for a favourable moment; it would speedily come; well, if not this summer, then assuredly next. Then they could go back to the Continent for the winter months, and things would be the same as before.

"But, my dear Dora," urged Brancepeth, "I have quite made up my mind to accept my father's offer, and so I shall be obliged to stay in Earlsport. We cannot maintain this false position longer. For both our sakes our marriage must be published."

"And then, of course, Lord Earlsfield will quarrel with me and claim my money."

"Well, be it so," returned Brancepeth, rather tartly; "if we don't quarrel with my father, who, so far as I am aware, cannot object to you as a daughter-in-law, it will be of the less consequence to us. My income from the bank, whatever it may be, will be sufficient to provide for us, and my father will probably do anything else that is necessary for the credit of the family."

They had met in a secluded hollow of the Dunes, which Dora could reach by a side-door from Earlscourt Park, and whither she frequently extended her walks to meet her husband. It lay well out of all the tracks across the Dunes, and opened out by a narrow defile between two sand-hills to the sea.

"But why tie yourself down to the bank? It would be horrible to have to live always at Earlsport, especially if Earlsfield should throw us off."

"We must endure it, however," observed Brancepeth, rather grimly.

Dorothy was thoughtful.

"It must be, I suppose," she said at last. "It will be a fearful trial, and I do not know how I shall ever go through it. But I must have time to think. And what shall I do if Earlsfield breaks out in a fury? Where shall I go?"

"To the Dunes House, of course. It is your own; it is your home, my dear."

"Ah, yes," said Dorothy, with a sigh; "I wish it were all over, and I were there. You cannot think how frightened I am to face Earlsfield. But could you not postpone your decision about joining the bank until I have told my brother? If he is to behave justly we shall have plenty money without your father, shall we not?"

"No," returned Brancepeth; "I have made up my mind. Since my father has held out his hand to me, it is my duty to take it. Besides, I am sick of this life of inaction and

listlessness. I must do something. Life in idleness is getting a burden."

"You are unhappy," cried Dorothy, quickly. "You are becoming tired of me. You want to be independent of me, and then you need no longer love me."

"You are very ungenerous, my dear," returned Stephen. "You could not expect me to be altogether happy while I am separated from you, while we are thus forced to meet by stealth, and while the world is ignorant of the relationship between us. Let us only be once together again as husband and wife openly in the sight of all men, and you shall have no reason to doubt my love."

And so Dorothy had to be satisfied, but it was with great reluctance that she consented to her husband joining the bank. She had felt that Brancepeth's dependence upon her and her fortune afforded some security for his love. She was painfully sensitive to the disparity in years between them, and jealously

watched her glass lest any mark of advancing age might make its appearance; and she was beginning to devote careful and unwonted pains to her toilet. Jealous fears also beset her. Since her return to Earlsport she had seen and marked Cloete Sparshott, and had not found much consolation in the contemplation of Cloete's fresh and opening beauty as compared with her own more matured charms. This was an additional reason why she should get her husband away from Earlsport, whatever course her brother might think fit to pursue with reference to her fortune.

But Brancepeth took his own way. He formally accepted his father's terms, and set about his duties at the bank. Mr Jellicoe constituted himself his special tutor, and under his guidance Stephen began to rapidly master his duties. He had always supposed that business would be specially distasteful to him; but now that he was throwing his whole mind into it as an escape from his own thoughts, he wondered at the interest he found himself able

to take in accounts, in statements, and in columns of figures even. Doubtless heredity came to his aid, and very shortly he found himself closing his desk with a sigh to return to the solitude of the Dunes House and his own thoughts. Mr Brancepeth marked this aptitude with secret pleasure, and received the delighted Mr Jellicoe's exaggerated reports of Mr Stephen's progress and cleverness without comment; but he prolonged the morning consultations which he and his son held upon the business of the day longer and longer, and received Stephen's views, when they happened to coincide with his own, with marked deference; very frequently the old man would detain him for dinner upon pretence of discussing some matter of business; and once he had paid Stephen the compliment of being his guest at the Dunes House, where he had narrowly inspected the *ménage*, but had received no confidences and asked for none. More than once Stephen had been on the point of telling his father of his marriage;

but the thought of the promise he had made to Dorothy, that she should be allowed to break the news to Lord Earlsfield first of all, forbade the disclosure, for which he was so impatiently waiting.

CHAPTER XXV.

EARLSCOURT *EN FAMILLE.*

On a certain evening the Earlscourt family were all assembled after dinner in the drawing-room, and so complete a gathering was rather an unusual event in that household, for Lord Earlsfield was wont to spend his evenings in the library, while the member found himself more at his ease in his own apartments, if his appetite for a cigar did not lead him, as it very frequently did, stablewards. Mrs Firebrace was the only permanent occupant of the drawing-room, where she sat and discussed the doctrine of eternal torments with any one who could be found complaisant enough to taste, by anticipation,

of the terrors of futurity. Mary Donne often struggled, from good-nature, to bear Mrs Firebrace company in the evenings, and endeavoured to carry on some secular conversation; but the widow invariably worked round to a comparison of her present state of grace with her previous unregenerate condition; and the graphic picture of the pains which the defunct Major was suffering for his delinquencies in the flesh would generally compel Mary to take to flight.

Since the return of his son, Lord Earlsfield had made a great effort to be sociable and domestic, uncongenial as he found such a part to be to his character. He sought to interest his brother and sisters in Harold, and to create something of a kindly family feeling among them. To a man of his reserved and stiff disposition the task was not an easy one, and his awkwardness, of which he was only too conscious, made him feel nervous about what the others might think of his display of amiability. He had always

ruled over his relations as a master, and a very arbitrary one; and it cost him a great struggle now to unbend himself and assume a more genial attitude. But it was for his son, as he told himself, that he was working: to secure Harold in his position, to strengthen his character, and, above all, to ward off risks of the recurrence of his malady. He was prepared to give up all his ways and sacrifice his old feelings. And his hopes of success were now high. The young man had come back much improved: both in appearance and manner he was all that could be desired in a gentleman; he was possessed of cultivated tastes, although Lord Earlsfield would have approved more of them, and could have sympathised better with them, had they taken a direction other than the natural and physical sciences. Lord Earlsfield was not quite certain whether science was a pursuit strictly proper for a nobleman. He searched his mind for precedents with but little success. There was, to be sure,

the Marquis of Worcester in King Charles's time, who was very often in his mind; but people thought him mad, as Lord Earlsfield remembered with a shudder. And there was an Earl of Orrery who invented—well, either an air-pump or something about the planets; but as an Irishman, he could not count for much. Lord Earlsfield could glean but little encouragement from these mental researches, and gravely feared that, on the whole, his son must be indulging in illegitimate pursuits.

They were quite a family party. Lord Earlsfield sat in the centre of the fireside drinking tea, which Mrs Firebrace dispensed at a table immediately behind him, varying her duties with the perusal of the miseries of a missionary who had sacrificed three wives in five years to the spread of the Gospel in the trying climate of Travancore. Harold sat dreaming, with his eyes intently fixed upon the fire, while Dorothy, at the window, was looking out into the dusk. George and Mary Donne were playing *bézique* in a corner

of the room and conversing in low tones, merely out of deference, let us hope, to Lord Earlsfield's presence, who, however, had been looking over his shoulder at them with some signs of impatience.

"You play *bézique*, I suppose," said Lord Earlsfield at length to Harold; "Miss Donne will be glad to have a game with you, after George and she have finished this one."

"No, thank you; I can play nothing but whist, and not much of that. I never could take much interest in games, and Captain Carshalton never allowed me to play when we were abroad."

"Ah! well, I suppose he was quite right," rejoined Lord Earlsfield; "cards are an accomplishment that cost many young men dear. I am very glad *you* have no gambling tastes."

The emphasis and slightly raised voice which Lord Earlsfield employed in this remark made George wince, and Miss Donne fix her eyes upon him with a look of severe meaning.

"Perhaps you will give us some music, Mary dear," resumed his lordship. "Harold, will you take Miss Donne to the piano?"

George Colpoys threw down his cards in a pet and strolled towards the window to his sister. "You must find this a lively place, Dolly, after your pleasant quarters abroad. For my part, I wonder how any one who can get a bed and a dinner elsewhere should ever think of hanging out here. I suppose you appreciate the meaning of that move," he added in a lower voice, leaning over his sister's chair, while he glanced in the direction of the piano, at which Mary Donne had now taken her seat, while Harold stood abstractedly leaning over her.

"What move?" asked Dorothy in the same tone, looking towards Lord Earlsfield, who had turned his chair round so as to take in a view of the piano.

"Why, are you blind? Don't you understand at last what Earlsfield's object has been

in taking care of Mary Donne and keeping her in cotton-wool here as he has done? You surely were never so silly as to imagine that it was out of pure benevolence. Don't you know your elder brother better than to suppose that he would do a good action unless he had some end in view? He is deep, is Earlsfield."

"What!" said Dorothy, opening her eyes, "you don't mean to say——" and the look she threw towards Harold and Mary finished the sentence.

"Hush! not so loud. That is just what I do mean; and it is cruelty—infamous cruelty, Dolly. It is quite as bad as those tribes in India who used to fatten up girls and sacrifice them to their gods. I got them up once in a Blue-book, but it turned out that the thing was out of date."

"I don't believe it," said Dorothy, dubiously; "it is too absurd. Poor Harold ought never to marry. And besides, I don't think he cares for her. See how listless he looks."

Certainly there was little appearance of interest in young Colpoys's manner as he leaned upon the piano, gazing vacantly towards the far end of the room. He had made an effort to turn the leaves of Miss Donne's music, but as he always intervened at the wrong time, his assistance did more harm than good. To poor Mary the situation was highly painful. She knew that Lord Earlsfield's eyes were upon her, and the feeling that he was expecting her to fascinate his son was of itself enough to make her silent. She had played two or three pieces, and as she turned over the leaves of her music wondering whether she might not venture to retreat, she made a desperate effort to say something.

"You were at the Museum again this afternoon," she said. "Do you find much there to interest you?"

"A good deal," replied Harold, wakening up; "the natural history collection is very full and notable, and the curator himself is

a most enthusiastic naturalist. He is a perfect mine of scientific knowledge. I am going back to see him again to-morrow."

"Have you seen his daughter, Miss Sparshott? She is very pretty. I have noticed her at church; the vicar is her uncle, you know, the Doctor's brother."

"She is the loveliest girl I have ever seen," said the downright youth, with a warmth in his tones that made every one in the room look up.

"I am sure she is," rejoined Mary Donne, heartily, "and they say she is so good and careful of her father. I have often wished I could know her."

"I suppose," said Lord Earlsfield, who had been an interested listener, "you are speaking of the girl who was so madly in love with Brancepeth, the banker's son. Brancepeth, if I remember rightly, quarrelled with the young man, and cast him off about her. Very rightly too. But as the son is back in the bank, I suppose he has got cured of

his folly. It is the same girl, is it not?" he added, turning round to George.

"The very same, sir," replied the member, "and a pretty girl she is. She might make a good match, I suppose, but for that queer old crabbed stick of a father of hers. Young Brancepeth used to be mad about her,—what is the matter with you, Dora? You are looking ill. I knew you would catch cold from sitting so close to the window. But it is all up between Brancepeth and Miss Sparshott somehow. I suppose the old man's money put in a prevailing argument on the other side, and no blame to Brancepeth. I should like to see the girl that I would prefer to the accumulated savings of Brancepeth Brothers. Hem!"

The member's eye had caught a glance from Mary Donne which promptly put a stop to his mercenary confessions, and he hurried on with some confusion.

"I have a notion that old Mold — that is, Fossebraye's partner, the man with the

eyes, you know—is sweet upon Miss Sparshott. I have seen her in his office, and upon my word she might do much worse. That old ruffian has got a rare sackful of plunder scraped together somewhere, you may safely bet."

The changes of countenance and impatience of manner which Harold exhibited while this conversation was going on were marked enough to excite Miss Donne's attention and Lord Earlsfield's fears. His face, which had at first blushed crimson like a schoolgirl's, changed to a dark-purple colour. His eyes, which generally had a soft, dreamy, and often evasive expression, now became lit up with fire, and turned boldly with a fixed defiant stare from one to the other of the speakers. His throat moved convulsively as if he were choking, and his hands seemed to grow nervously rigid, each finger standing out apart from the other. But, luckily for him, Dorothy quickly drew the attention of the company to herself.

"I shall go to my room," she said; "I suppose it is the draught from the window that has given me a violent neuralgia. Don't you come, dear," she hastily added, as Mary Donne, gladly recognising a chance of escape, rose up to accompany her; "I had much rather be alone. I always find quiet the best thing for neuralgia."

"We think much of the pains the human body has to endure," observed Mrs Firebrace, sententiously, as she folded down a page of her book and sweetened another cup of tea for herself; "but how little trouble do we give ourselves concerning what our precious souls may hereafter have to suffer! Warning after warning neglected."

"A truism of which you are affording us a most disagreeable illustration," retorted Lord Earlsfield, testily, "for I have warned you again and again that I will not have such subjects thrust into ordinary conversation."

Mrs Firebrace retorted by an angry sniff, and resumed her book. Though reading

only to herself, she had a habit of pronouncing her words under her breath, so that when her temper was ruffled, as very frequently occurred, those who were near to her could participate in the benefits of the subject in which she was engaged. Lord Earlsfield's ear could catch such expressions as "puffed up with pride," "shrouded in hardness and self-conceit," "scoffing at words in season," "great and terrible day," "rocks and mountains to fall upon us"; and he scornfully edged his chair a few paces farther away from the reader,—a movement which Mrs Firebrace on her part indignantly imitated.

"But," asked Harold, "why did Mr Brancepeth quarrel with his son about Miss Sparshott? Is she not a lady?"

"Hem!" rejoined Lord Earlsfield, slowly. "I fancy the young woman occupies a somewhat dubious position in the eyes of those people in the town who regard themselves as constituting its society. Her uncle is the vicar, a most worthy — a most estimable

person; but her father — well, hum! — I suppose her father has not met with that success in life which his scientific attainments no doubt deserved, and in the town people are susceptible of nice distinctions which seem inexpressibly small to persons in our position. So that while we can afford to recognise the curator's daughter as a lady, we can appreciate that there are reasons coming home closely to Mr Brancepeth, the banker, which would make him take an opposite view so far as his son was concerned. But the matter is one in which we can have no interest."

Harold seemed not quite so sure of this, and leaned moodily against the piano, looking his father very fixedly in the face. Lord Earlsfield felt very uneasy under the young man's glance, and the warning of Captain Carshalton against thwarting or contradicting his son's views flashed across his mind. He did not like the admiration which Harold had avowed for the Doctor's daughter. He

foresaw trouble, and prayed devoutly that he might soon be able to bring round a marriage with Mary Donne.

"As the ladies are gone," said Lord Earlsfield, rising, "I shall finish my evening in the library, and leave George and you to your devices in the smoking-room." But as he went out he was startled to hear his son say to the member—

"I have no patience with such antiquated prejudices. If a lady is a lady she must be a lady. Miss Sparshott is the prettiest and most lady-like girl I have ever seen. I must get Aunt Dorothy to call and make her acquaintance."

"I shall have trouble with that boy," groaned Lord Earlsfield. "He has no just appreciation of his rank, and a disagreeable, logical, levelling way of looking at things. Somehow I must bring matters to a head between him and Mary Donne. It is the only salvation for us all."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THREE IN COMPANY.

One morning at Earlscourt was very much the same as another. In that well-regulated household each of the inmates fell into a groove of life which was followed up, save when any extraneous accident shunted them temporarily on to other lines, and such accidents were phenomenally rare. Every morning Lord Earlsfield did homage to his Maker, as an act of deference due from a high to a higher power, and he ordained that all his relations and dependants should be present to add dignity to the ceremony and to witness that it was duly and truly performed. There were, however, black sheep

of known laxity with regard to attendance at the domestic altar. George Colpoys's unpunctuality was frequent enough to be regarded as a family scandal; but as Lord Earlsfield had had occasion to note that a religious reformation on the part of his brother was always the prelude to a demand for money, he was content to wink at the member's remissness. Dorothy, too, since she had come into her aunt's fortune, had shown a latitudinarian indifference to morning prayers, and a decided preference for breakfasting in her own room and dawdling away the morning there; but she too was felt to be a privileged person with whom it would be useless to interfere.

Lord Earlsfield's mornings were devoted to business; George's began with a stroll stablewards and a cigar, and of late he had taken to sauntering about the old summer-house at the time when Mary Donne was wont to feed her pigeons. The member was in love; there was no disguising the fact from

himself. It was not the first time his passions had been stirred. Some fifteen or twenty years before he had been a young man about town, and had treated himself to all the pleasures that his money could purchase. He had made his way behind the scenes of the theatres; and more than one lady of the *corps de ballet* had inspired him with a more than Platonic affection. He had imagined himself wretched when the rich and beautiful Miss Melrose from Manchester, with whom he thought he was making some headway, had thrown him over as a detrimental, and married the Marquis of Cinque-ports. "But this," meditated George, contrasting his former experiences with his present passion, "this is quite another sixpence." The feeling was strange and uncomfortable, but not without a certain dash of pleasurable excitement. There were very few follies that he had not fathomed; he was long past the age of illusions, he fancied; he was a sated, jaded man, who lived in a world covered

with faded draperies, and with the gilt rubbed off it. The idea, he told himself, was ridiculous that a man of his age and experience should leave off where he ought to have begun; and now that the little means which he had ever possessed were all squandered, he should think of a disinterested attachment for a girl of about half his age, and scarcely a whit richer than himself. It was preposterous. What had he really ever cared for marriage? Had he not been much more comfortable and happy than many of his domesticated friends? Had he not marked with a *suave mare magnum* sort of pleasure the shifts to which they had been put to gain a little run of liberty, the devices and deceptions they had been obliged to practise in order to slip for a time the conjugal collar, and the disastrous consequences which befell them upon discovery? Why should he not let well alone? Especially as, if he did not, he would run himself into a difficulty with Lord Earlsfield compared with which

all his previous scrapes would appear as virtues.

"Yes, that is just it," reflected he; "it would be battle, murder, and sudden death with Earlsfield; and here I am walking up and down waiting for her, as if it were my business. Hang it all! what a cursed world this is! A rotten, God-forsaken world, whatever they may say of it."

"Hilloa, George, that is strong language!" cried Harold, who, coming behind, had overheard the last words, which the member in his bitterness had uttered aloud. "I did not expect you to take such a pessimistic view of the matter. I should have thought you rather held with Pangloss that this is the best of all possible worlds; and here you are railing away like any old Timon."

"Never heard of the gentleman," retorted George, gruffly; "and if this is the best of all possible worlds I wish you would tell me where some of the others are,—I'm going to emigrate."

"Anything gone wrong, old man?" asked Harold, linking his arm through the member's. "Not the Cesarewitch? Kidney Beans hasn't gone lame or got off her feed? Or have these beggars in the borough been making themselves disagreeable again?"

"I don't know that there is anything very right anywhere," grumbled the member; "things are beastly. But what are you up to this morning? Going to blow up anything in that laboratory of yours?"

"No; I am idling to-day. I was brought to a standstill for want of some stuff which I have telegraphed to London for, and which won't be here before to-morrow morning. But here comes Miss Donne; let us go and see her feed her pets."

And he dragged the member not unwillingly along after Mary, round whose head the pigeons, which had been on the watch for her, were swiftly circling, and almost darting at the basket which carried their food; and one bolder than the rest had

lighted on her shoulder and balanced himself there while she gently stroked his feathers and patted his head.

"O fair dove! O fond dove!" hummed Harold, who was in unusually high spirits.

"Ought to be thinned these pigeons," growled the member, who was annoyed with himself and annoyed with Harold for depriving him of his *tête-à-tête* with Mary Donne. "Why is it one never sees pigeon-pie in this place? The Court is being overrun with them."

"How horrible!" cried Mary Donne, indignantly; "don't you know that these pigeons are sacred? Lord Earlsfield has given orders that no one is to dare touch them."

"The Lord's will be done, in this as in all else," muttered George; "such an instance of humanity merits respect for its uniqueness."

"You should see the Manumea pigeons from the South Seas which Dr Sparshott has got at the Museum," broke in Harold, "quite

marvellous birds they are—second cousins to the defunct dodo of interesting memory. Let me take you along to see them some afternoon, Miss Donne."

"It strikes me," said the member, throwing himself back upon a seat in a corner of the summer-house and pointing his cigar judicially in the direction of his nephew; "it strikes me that the less your studies lead you in the direction of the Museum the more satisfactory will it be to your venerated and anxious parent."

There was a disagreeable ring in George's voice which made Mary Donne look up in some surprise; and indeed he felt in a very nasty frame of mind. His usual talk with Mary had been interrupted, and he was little disposed to have mercy upon the intruder.

"Why!" cried Harold, much surprised; "what should my father care about it? He is quite willing for me to follow my own pursuits; and gives me money too to enable me to do it, like a dear old fellow as he is."

"Hem!" retorted George, "the fact that Lord Earlsfield should give you or anybody else money, is certainly remarkable enough to be noted. But your scientific glance must have perceived that Dr Sparshott's extensive and varied collection includes one specimen —unclassified, I believe, and certainly not stuffed — which it might be dangerous to study too closely."

"You mean?" cried Harold, with an angry gleam in his eye, as he turned and fully faced the member.

"I mean that beautiful daughter of his, to whose charms when recounted by yourself Lord Earlsfield lent a more attentive than appreciative ear."

The young man's face flushed purple, and with difficulty he mastered the wrathful elements within him, which were surging up in the direction of an indignant explosion.

"Don't mind him, Harold," said Mary Donne kindly, coming to the lad's release. "Mr Colpoys doesn't know how cross to be

this morning. He has vented his ill-humour on my pigeons, and now he wants to tease you. I am sure you said nothing about Miss Sparshott but what I have heard him say himself—often."

"Oh!" returned Harold, casting rather a dubious look upon George. Was it possible, he thought, that this relative, who belonged to an antecedent generation, could also admire Cloete Sparshott; and if he did, would he want to marry her? The thought was uncomfortable, but it served to divert his rising anger.

"Well, you see," continued George, crossly, "I am in the happy position of a man who can say anything and mean nothing about women. Though I were to remark that Miss Sparshott was fairer than the Venus What-d'ye-call-her who comes out of the sea, Lord Earlsfield would simply give a pitying shrug of the shoulders at a fresh instance of my vulgar tastes. But when his only son and heir waxes enthusiastic in

praise of the same young lady, and pursues his scientific researches in her immediate vicinity, one cannot wonder at the poor man feeling uneasy."

"I must say," broke in Harold, warmly, "I think it a shame to drag any young lady's name into a discussion in this fashion. It's—it's unmanly. I—I wish I had never mentioned Miss Sparshott's name. When I have seen her at the Museum she has received me with mere politeness and courtesy, and when I spoke last night of her beauty, which I could not help doing, I had no idea that I was to cause her name to be tossed about in this fashion. How would you, or I either, feel if Miss Donne's name or Dora's were bandied about among outsiders in this way?"

"Thank you, Harold," said Mary, warmly; "yours is the true chivalrous view. Among all the disabilities of women this is the greatest, that people say what they like about us, and that no one thinks of taking our part."

"That is so," said Harold, growing eloquent by her encouragement; "and in the case of Miss Sparshott, whom George has so outrageously traduced"——"How?" interrupted the member, amid a mouthful of smoke——"I say whom he has sneered at as if she were an attraction that took me to the Museum. Her singular beauty and her helplessness ought to defend her from being made a subject of gossip. As for me," continued Harold, drawing himself up, "I am quite able to regulate my own actions. If I were in love with the girl, I would marry her if she cared to have me, and that would be unlikely enough with all my imperfections —with my one great, great weakness—God help me!"

"O Lord!" groaned George, "poor Earlsfield! This would be worse than the loss of the borough, and half-a-dozen coal-pits to boot."

Mary glanced appealingly to George to shift the subject, but the member smoked on

in dogged silence. And now Harold, thoroughly roused, his nervous nature wound up to a high pitch of excitement, and his generous feeling stung by the scorn which he conceived was being cast through him upon the girl whom he admired so greatly, had plenty to say once he had found his tongue.

"The world is utterly wrong in its views of love and women," he poured forth; "and the social and artificial system of marriages has always been the greatest evil that the progress of the race has had to struggle against. What is the use of marriage? I say what is marriage for but the continuation of the race; and yet this, which is its main object, is the one which is least of all thought about. A man when left to himself will pick out a girl who offers the one quality that he has most in his mind, whether it be personal beauty, or wealth, or position, and if he can compass this he cares very little what counterbalancing defects go along

with it. Well, he is satisfied; but it is at the cost of his children, who inherit those deficiencies to curse their lives that to the parents were only external disadvantages. Natural selection, and the most careful selection, should be the rule in marriage, and all such extrinsic circumstances as rank, wealth, or social position should be subordinated to the great consideration of a woman's fitness for being a wife. Look at the care we take of our cattle and horses. If we gave half the thought to the breeding of ourselves that we do to them, we should be a far finer race in every respect. And look at the brutes, who live a life of absolute freedom and are quite unfettered in the choice of mates. They too proceed upon a natural principle of selection which is justified by the fact that so long as they are not affected by external circumstances or by the encroachment of man they continue their strain in its original vigour and in almost immunity from disease. Of course in us there is a

higher principle co-ordinating and regulating all those considerations, which impels one's mind upon another; and this love, to be strong and pure, must be the sum of our perceptions of all the requisite mental and physical qualities. When such temptations as rank and wealth are taken into account, we subside to a standpoint which is neither manly nor philosophic."

"Bravo, Harold!" cried the member, who had been listening with open-mouthed amazement to this tirade, "you deserve to be a Professor of Polygamy, if that is the right name for your science. Brigham Young with all his experience could not be more eloquent."

"But," said Mary Donne, whose interest was aroused by the young man's vehemence, "if absolute perfection were so imperative an essential, I fear that marriages would become few or none."

"Absolute perfection is impossible, or could only be procured after centuries of careful

breeding and of painfully eradicating the weaknesses and vices of the race. Then we would have a millennium indeed, and a humanity almost as potential and perfect as our environments would admit of. And this is to be brought about, not by Acts of Parliament, or by social opinion, but rather in defiance of social opinion. Let every man select his wife for himself, but let him select her so that she will be the complement of himself—that she has what he ought to have and has not; that the strong qualities in her character counterbalance the weak points in his; that the two together make up one perfect whole. That is the true and natural selection, instead of the ignorance or passion, or folly or selfishness, which rules the union of the sexes in the present day."

"I foresee," said George, looking dreamily into a cloud of smoke,—"I foresee a future race of Colpoyses evolved into such a state of absolute intellectuality that I am quite paralysed at contemplating it. The women

will all graduate with honours at Girton, and the men be all Presidents of the Board of Trade. And the future Lord Earlsfield—only these transcendental descendants of yours, Harold, will have soared above such vulgar things as peerages — will keep my skull on his study mantelpiece as a relic of the barbarians from whom he has been evolved. And, pray, is Miss Sparshott the—ah, well—complement with which you mean to give us the start upwards on this inclined plane?"

Harold flushed crimson, and then grew pale, struggled a moment for speech, and then said very gravely, "I don't think you need have said that. Do you think it would be consistent with my views to marry any one? Am I not in my own person doomed to furnish a standing illustration of the result with which society disregards the just laws of nature. You know it, and I know it, and the subject is not a pleasant one—to me at all events. But you speak in chaff, which I don't mind. But as you have kept reiterating Miss

Sparshott's name, I don't mind telling you exactly how I feel about her. I am very much interested in her—much attracted by her. To look upon her face is a pleasure as keen as to look upon a perfect picture, with the addition that she has the power of expression and of returning feeling for feeling. I would like to make a companion of her"——Here the member scandalised both the speaker and Miss Donne by giving utterance to a low prolonged whistle——"Yes, a companion and a friend. We all need companionship and sympathy, and it comes more tenderly from a woman than from a man. It is one of the great faults of our social system that the idea of sexual love and marriage so entirely overshadows the intercourse of the two sexes as to render it rare, and all but impossible. Why can't a man and a woman be close and intimate friends, just as two men or two women can, without this idea being always in the background, always interposing itself between their confidences. This feeling, which society

by its code of fictitious *convenances* directly promotes, always prevents a full and frank friendship. But until a woman becomes far enough advanced to wholly believe that a man may wish to be friends with her for herself without any ulterior views, she will always occupy a relatively inferior position. I beg pardon, Miss Donne, for boring you so much on such a subject, but I was quite carried away beyond myself; and now I shall be off, in case of being tempted to prose further on one of my favourite themes."

He abruptly left them, Mary Donne looking contemplatively over the tree-tops at the slaty sea beyond, dotted here and there with the ruffle of a white wavelet, while George continued to smoke in profound meditation.

"How could you tease him on to say such things?" demanded Miss Donne, at last turning round suddenly upon the member.

"What things?" returned he. "It sounded deuced like sense a lot of it, but I don't know how it would work. And as for teasing, I

could not help being cross. What business has he to come badgering us here, when I wanted to talk to you?"

"Had you anything particular to say?" inquired Mary, rather sharply.

"Well, nothing very particular; and even if I had had, that fellow's diatribe would have put it out of my head. Well, we must wait and see the end of events. Harold will have to take Earlsfield's way. I daresay he is in love with the Sparshott girl, or if he isn't, he will very soon be. But Earlsfield will make him marry whether he pleases or not, and whom he pleases too, to boot."

They sat for a long while in silence, occupied with their respective thoughts, and then Mary rose and took her basket to return to the house.

"Don't go yet," cried George, springing up; "why, we are just only beginning to have a comfortable talk."

"Comfortable indeed! when none of us has spoken a word for at least a quarter of an hour.

But I promised to go to Dora's room this forenoon. She has got a headache, and is not coming down."

"She is always having some game or another is Dora," growled George, as lighting a fresh cigar, he sauntered his solitary way back again in the direction of the stable-yard.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BRANCEPETH'S CLIENT.

With his work at the bank, a new life seemed opened up to Stephen Brancepeth. Immersed in the task of mastering a business for which he soon discovered that he had a great natural aptitude and unanticipated liking, he had little time left to brood over his past or to nurse gloomy fears of present and future difficulties. Since he had accepted his position in the house of Brancepeth Brothers, he determined to leave no pains unspared to qualify himself for becoming an efficient assistant and successor to his father. He had an able tutor in Mr Jellicoe, the old cashier, who had held in his hands all the strings of the business of Brance-

peth Brothers for a quarter of a century back; and his father, under the form of consulting his junior partner, was every day instilling into him the higher principles of banking finance. The old man had given orders that everything should be left to Mr Stephen's responsibility which he might reasonably be expected to comprehend; and he watched with no small delight the judgment and caution which the younger man had brought to bear upon the business. The senior Brancepeth had never had a very high idea of his son's abilities; he had disliked his careless dilettante habits, and he had absolutely despised him for the infatuated folly which had made him quarrel with his prospects for a chit of a girl who had neither pence nor position. But all that was over now. The prodigal had returned, and was showing himself well worthy of the calf which was fattening up for him. The house of Brancepeth Brothers would take a fresh lease of life, and might still see the bones of its mushroom joint-stock rivals

picked by the liquidators. Stephen would, of course, marry and marry well; there was no danger of a man who showed such a capacity for business details throwing himself recklessly away; and the old banker prudently resolved to offer no advice in this direction. Indeed, when he thought of Stephen's marriage he gave a grim smile and a shrug of the shoulders, as if he had a certain assurance that the future Mrs Stephen Brancepeth would quite meet with his approval.

Stephen, on his part, no longer led the secluded life in which he had begun his residence at the Dunes House. He had constantly to come in contact with many of the leading business men in Earlsport at the bank; he looked in occasionally at the club, and he sparingly accepted invitations. He even showed some bachelor hospitality at the Dunes House, but it was remarked that he was very exclusive in both issuing and accepting invitations; and Earlsport society, which was miscellaneous and comprehen-

sive, resented it accordingly. And it was freely said that young Brancepeth at the bank was quite as great a "screw" as the old man. And this was the very verdict that Stephen Brancepeth was courting. He knew that Earlsport had already set him down as soft and foolish, and he was determined that Earlsport should discover its mistake, even if he forced himself to go somewhat to the other extreme. No sooner had his partnership been announced, than several of his former acquaintances, who would never have dared to face the head of the firm, had endeavoured to wheedle him into some accommodating transactions; but these had retired sadder and wiser men, and with but a poor appreciation of Mr Stephen's speculative enterprise.

Constant occupation and practical contact with the world made Stephen look forward with less misgiving to the difficulties which still remained to be encountered. He thought much less now of the risk of Lord Earlsfield's

wrath when he came to hear of his marriage with Dorothy. Lord Earlsfield would probably raise a claim to Dorothy's money—indeed he would probably be able to enforce his claim; but let the worst befall, and what then? As a partner in a wealthy and old-established bank, he could claim Dorothy Colpoys for his wife without her being taunted with making a *mésalliance;* and, with the fortune which awaited him, he could afford to look upon even such a loss as that of Lady Pye's money with tolerable equanimity. Of course, as Brancepeth told himself, with his newly developed business views, the money justly belonged to his wife: it would be a gross injustice to deprive her of it; and he would certainly, as far as was in his power, resist any attempt upon his lordship's part to lay hands upon it. His father's judgment and counsel would be valuable here; and he longed to take him into his confidence, and ask his advice; but there was his pledge of secrecy to Dorothy still

in the way. At their secret meetings he continued to press her to announce the marriage, and although she always promised, she never had as yet been able to screw up her courage to the point of revelation. And Brancepeth was becoming so absorbed in his new life that he felt there was less urgency in the matter than before. The fine strain of selfishness in Brancepeth's nature made him, now that he was at ease regarding himself, less sensitive as to the anxieties in which Dorothy was involved by the situation. He even began to think that he had acted foolishly, precipitately. Why had he ever quarrelled with his father? Why had he not taken to the bank in time? Had he waited he might have controlled his own destiny, and have been able to make his own choice. Once a partner in the bank, he might have married Cloete Sparshott without his father being able to resent the step by more than a formal objection. No; he had decidedly been precipitate, and the

result was that here he was married to a woman a good deal older than himself, who was already *passée*, while Cloete was lovelier than ever. He resented the idea that he could be ungrateful to Dorothy, who had come to his rescue in his direst straits and helplessness; but had she not perhaps taken advantage of him in his utterly abject condition? It was tolerably easy for him to argue round to the conclusion that he had better let well alone. And what would Cloete say when she heard of his marriage? He knew quite well that the girl had still an interest in him, perhaps thought that a renewal of their old love was in store for them. Would she not utterly despise him when she heard how he had sold himself?

Brancepeth, too, was well aware that since his return and reconciliation with his father, he had become a personage of decided social consequence in Earlsport, an object of primary interest to match-making mothers and marriageable daughters. There are few men so

cold as not to feel a certain amount of pleasure at the thought that bright eyes are watching anxiously in what direction the handkerchief is to be thrown. Brancepeth was both amused and flattered by the incense burned to him in Earlsport families; but he took good care to preserve a very guarded demeanour, to avoid the least appearance of flirtation, and to have no intimacies. When Dorothy came to live with him, she would form her own circle, quite unfettered by any acquaintances of his. He had endeavoured to make an exception in favour of his old confidant Mrs Fossebraye; but that lady in her outspoken way had plainly told him he was a brute, and that until he had repaired his errors by marrying Cloete Sparshott, she did not wish to see his face.

As for Cloete herself, he hardly knew whether to be thankful or piqued by the girl's evident avoidance of him. She hurried past him on the street with the coldest response to his salutations; he had seen her

turn down a side-street to escape a *rencontre;* his restless spirit had led him into the paths of their old favourite haunts, and his appearance there had been the signal for her to shun these localities. He had wanted to talk to her, to confide to her as far as he could, saving his promise to Dorothy; but the chance never presented itself, and it seemed to him as if Cloete was determined to prevent its occurrence.

But at a time and place when he had least expected, a meeting was brought about. There was in the bank a certain Mr Briggs, or "young Briggs," as he was called from the fact of his father having been a clerk in Brancepeths before him, although he himself was a good half-score of years beyond his teens. From a reckless and incorrigible youth, who added years to Mr Jellicoe's age, and who had been tolerated only on account of his father's services, young Briggs had developed into that objectionable character a "funny man." He was the life of his club

at the Viking's Arms, and was a fellow of such infinite jest that when the severe eyes of Mr Jellicoe were absent, he would chaff and play jokes upon customers even at the sacred altars of Mammon, the counters of Brancepeth Brothers. Now it happened that when Mr Jellicoe had stepped out one forenoon, and young Briggs was attending to customers, Miss Cloete Sparshott entered the bank with a very disconcerted countenance, and begged to speak with Mr Brancepeth in private. The troubled condition of her father's affairs had already on previous occasions led to Cloete having to make appeals for Mr Brancepeth's indulgence, which had been stiffly accorded, and young Briggs knew quite well that the sire and not the son was sought for by the young lady. But young Briggs knew, as every one else in the bank did, the old story about Stephen and Cloete, and his native humour suggested that here was just the chance for a "lark," for old Mr Brancepeth had gone out on business,

and would not be in for some little time. Here was an incident which when told, as he alone could tell it, at the "Viking," would make his fellow Berserkers fall off their chairs with laughter. So he announced to Mr Stephen that a lady desired to see him on urgent business, and before the junior partner could hazard a conjecture who the lady might be, young Briggs had blandly ushered Miss Sparshott into the room.

She drew back with a start and in confusion, "I have made a mistake. It was Mr Brancepeth I wanted to see. Will you take me to him, please?" she added despairingly, to Briggs.

"My father is out," said Stephen, rising and offering his hand, "but if I can be of use to you—Briggs, you are a fool! You are always blundering into some mistake or other. You can go." And when young Briggs had retired, covering a grin under some show of confusion, Brancepeth turned

to Cloete, who in her agitation knew not whether to go or stay.

"What is it, Cloete?" he asked, holding out his hand, which, however, the girl did not take. "There is something, I am sure, the matter. You must let me help you."

"No, Mr Brancepeth," said Cloete; "it was your father I wished to see. I have been with him before on business. If I had thought I was to see you, I would not have come at all."

"As I have told you, my father is not here this morning, but I take his place. You know I am a partner here now, Cloete," he added, forcing a smile, "and if I can assist you in any financial transaction, I am your very humble servant."

Cloete stood irresolute. To endure the cold cutting indulgence of the father, who would concede a favour to her as he would throw a bone to a dog, was hard enough; but to expose herself to the sympathy, perhaps the proffered kindness, of her former

lover, was to her tenfold more unendurable. A voice whispered in her heart that it was her father's cause she was pleading, but her maidenly feelings rose up in arms against the tempting argument.

"I cannot tell you," she said; "it is business, business of my father's, which Mr Brancepeth knows about. I shall come back again. I had no idea that I was to see you."

Brancepeth, however, put himself between her and the door. "You do not trust me, Cloete," he said, sadly; "well, I daresay I don't deserve it, and I have no right to complain; but I would gladly be your friend if I could. I am sure you are in some trouble now, which very likely it would be a simple enough matter for me to put right for you."

The girl hesitated. Her father's difficulties, her fear of the stern senior partner, were waging an equal struggle with her pride and with a dread of again committing

herself in any way, and it was difficult to conjecture to which side the victory would incline.

"Come, Cloete," urged Brancepeth, seeing her hesitation, "I wish to be your friend, your brother, if you will allow me. If you knew how I long for your sympathy, your confidence—now, alas! all I dare ask you for—you would not refuse me. I have said that I can never again ask you to let us be as we were before. You will one day know all my sad story—yes, Cloete, you will know it soon—very soon. I am a wretched man, Cloete!"

There was a successful infusion of tragedy into his tones, which softened Cloete Sparshott, much as she was struggling to be firm. She hesitated in doubt, and Brancepeth quickly followed up his advantage.

"Yes, I have done wrong, Cloete, and must bear my punishment. The loss of you, the knowledge that I can never again claim your love, that you are near me, and

yet divided from me by an unsurmountable barrier which can never be levelled—these feelings are more than enough to madden me. As God hears me, Cloete Sparshott, you are never out of my thoughts night or day."

Plucking up courage and summoning her dignity to her aid, she answered: "You say there is an unsurmountable barrier between us. Well, let it be. You know what it is; I do not. Let it remain there, and let me go away."

"No, Cloete," he broke in, still more passionately, "though I can be nothing to you, I crave your sympathy—your love—as a brother. I would ask you to do nothing wrong; your honour is dearer to me than my own soul; but give me your trust, your sympathy, your friendship, Cloete. Do not let us be any longer to each other as strangers, as enemies even."

"And my feelings," cried Cloete, with bitter agony, "are they not to be thought

of? Is it necessary to your happiness to again play with me? You ask me for bread, and offer me a stone in return. Considering what has passed between us, can you ask me to expose myself to the risk of your friendship? Do you think that I too have not suffered? Do you wish me to drink deeper of misery? The request is selfish, Mr Brancepeth."

Brancepeth felt abashed at the well-merited rebuke, and quickly shifted his ground.

"You are right," he said, humbly; "I am selfish, or rather, thoughtless. I am so much wrapped up in my own sorrows that I have no heart to think of others. And yet, Cloete, of all my troubles this is the hardest to bear—your enmity to me, your unkindness. It is true I have deserved this at your hands, but that only makes it the harder for me." There was a true ring of pain in the man's voice which touched Cloete. Was he really suffering, and was she hard and unsympathetic with him?

She did not wish to be so; she would do all she could to comfort him, consistent with her own safety and honour. And perhaps he was not so much to blame after all.

"I do not wish to be unkind," she said, hesitatingly. "I can never bear enmity to you. But you must know—that is, you can surely understand why I——" and she hesitated, at a loss how to finish her sentence.

"Yes," he returned, slowly, "I know, I understand all. I shall ask you to risk nothing for me, Cloete. Destiny has been too much for me, and I have succumbed to it like a coward. It is much to me to hear that you do not hate me, that you do not wish to be unkind to me."

"Why should I?" replied Cloete, regaining her firmness; "the past is past with you and me too. Why should we think of it, and, still more, why should we revive its recollection by speaking of it?"

"Oh, Cloete," returned Brancepeth, "but it can never be past with me. I live in it

and for it, but you can soften its memories, if you will say that you can still trust me, —that you will let me be to you as a friend."

"Yes, I can certainly trust you," she replied; "but do you think it well for both of us—for me as well as you——"

"And you will let me—let your brother help you, Cloete," he interrupted, waiving away her objections; "you came here to-day about something that was troubling you. Tell me all about it."

"I suppose I must," said the girl, still dubious as to whether she was doing right; "it is this paper—this bill which has been sent us—my father has to pay it here at the bank, and it is not quite convenient—he has not got the money yet. I wanted to see Mr Brancepeth—he would give me time—he has been considerate to my father before."

"Oh, that is all," said Brancepeth, glancing at the bank notice, which informed Dr Sparshott that his acceptance to Mr John Spung

at three months for twenty-five pounds was now matured at the Earlsport Bank, and payable within three days to prevent the note from being protested. "This is a very small matter for you to worry about, and quite within my limited knowledge of banking. I shall see that Dr Sparshott gets sufficient time to meet the bill, and you need not trouble yourself more about it. And if any other matter of the same kind occurs again, you had better come to me. My father does not care much to be interrupted about such matters, and is apt to be abrupt. But you may depend upon my attention to Dr Sparshott's interests."

Before Cloete could quite master the position in which Brancepeth's offer placed her, a noise was heard at the door, which resolved itself into the voice of young Briggs in altercation with that of a lady.

"If you will kindly wait, madam, I shall announce you to Mr Brancepeth. He is

engaged, madam—particularly engaged—a lady client."

"I shall announce myself," was heard through the door, already half-opened, and Dorothy Colpoys hastily entered the room.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A NEW CONFIDANT.

THE consternation which Dorothy's irruption brought with her into the room was equally distributed among all the three. Probably Cloete Sparshott was the least affected. She had come on legitimate banking business, although of a delicate nature, and conscious of her own integrity and having no secret hanging over her, she readily overcame her embarrassment.

The sight of Cloete, however, was to Dorothy a furious stimulus to her jealous feelings. She knew the girl immediately, and her fresh young beauty, her colour delicately heightened and her eyes still glistening

from the agitations of her interview with Brancepeth, were an intolerable offence to the older woman. She could forgive her her beauty, which she scanned with harshly critical eyes, but she could not pardon her her youth. That was a damning fact in Dorothy's eyes, which neither taste nor criticism could get rid of.

As for Stephen, he was at first perfectly staggered by the intrusion. A bitter thought of the Don-Juan-like comicality of the situation flashed across his mind, only to give place to a feeling that here was retribution brought bodily home to him in the person of both his victims. The last half-hour had precipitated him so much towards Cloete Sparshott, that he could not readily disentangle his mind from her, and a feeling of resentment rose up against Dorothy as the aggressor and the wanton destroyer of his peace of mind. Mastering himself with a desperate effort, he held out his hand towards Dorothy. "I hope I see you well, Miss

Colpoys. Is there anything I can do for you? I shall be at your service in a minute." And placing a chair for her, he turned his back upon the angry lady and again addressed himself to Cloete: "You may assure your father, Miss Sparshott, that I shall attend to his instructions about this—this memorandum. I see the date is to-day—it must be looked to at once," ostentatiously reading over the notice, "and you will remember that in any other matters of the same kind, it will give me much pleasure to forward the Doctor's views;" and shaking hands with Cloete, he had bowed her out before she could utter a word in rejoinder.

"And now, Dorothy," he exclaimed, coming hastily back to the chair where his wife was seated fanning her face with a pocket-handkerchief,—"what in heaven's name is the matter?"

"The matter!" she echoed, indignantly. "Yes, you may ask what is the matter! What were you doing with that girl?"

"That girl! Was it because Miss Sparshott had business to transact with me that you have burst in here in all this flurry?"

"Business! Pretty business, I daresay. This is what you do at the bank. Did you not swear to me that it was all over between you and her?"

"It is all over between me and her in the sense you mean. This is a bank, and I am obliged to see any one who comes to transact business with me."

"So I suppose. And Miss Sparshott? Does she often come here to transact business with you? And in your private room too."

"A great deal of banking business has to be transacted in private rooms. People do not always care to state their wants across a public counter."

"I suppose not," said Dorothy, loftily. "Does she come here every day?"

"She has never been here before, and may not come again. I hope for her own sake she may not have to come, poor thing!"

"Poor thing indeed!"

"Now, look here, Dorothy," cried Brancepeth, impatiently, "I must have a stop put to this. You know quite well that I am a faithful husband to you, and that any jealousy on your part is solely of your own causing. One word from you, and the whole of your suspicions are removed. Once let our marriage be known, and there will be no possibility of any future misunderstandings."

"Ah!" said Dorothy, her face falling, and her wrath vanishing, "it is about that I have come here. I have had such a horrible letter from Jim. He knows all."

"From Colonel Colpoys? Well, he must soon have heard of it at all events. I trust Colonel Colpoys does not intend to visit our marriage with his heavy displeasure."

Brancepeth spoke with somewhat of a sneer, for the Honourable James Colpoys's opinion was not one that mattered much to the other members of his family.

"No; poor Jim!" returned Dorothy, hesi-

tatingly; "but he threatens to tell Earlsfield everything at once unless——"

"Well, you had made up your mind to tell Lord Earlsfield everything yourself."

"Certainly; I have been waiting for a good opportunity, but there has never—there has never been a proper occasion."

"I should think the present occasion a very proper one, unless you want Lord Earlsfield to learn from your brother's lips what he should certainly have heard first from your own—or from mine. I am quite ready to go to his lordship and tell him the whole truth, to-day if you like."

"No, no, not to-day. I shall do it myself. As you say, he ought not to hear it from any one except myself. And I will try hard to get a chance. But what am I to do about Jim? I was so frightened when I got his letter that I could not rest until I had come straight off to you."

"I don't know what you should do about

him. Tell Lord Earlsfield, and then you can do anything you like."

"Here is his letter," said Dorothy, handing her husband a missive written in a scrawling hand, with which numberless Jew discounters and bill-brokers would readily have confessed their familiarity :—

St Leger Cottage, West Ham.

My dear Dora,—You must have thought it very unbrotherly of me not to have congratulated you long ago on your marriage with young Brancepeth, but I only heard of it by accident the other day. Not much of a match for a Colpoys, but *anni labuntur.* What did Earlsfield say about it? Or is he too in the dark? I hope he will give you his fraternal benediction, and make no bones about our aunt's money.

Can you, my dear Dora, lend me five hundred pounds until after the Goodwood Meeting, when I shall be in funds to repay you? You

know I don't care to trouble Earlsfield with letters, and if you can let me have the money, I shall not bother writing to him now, although I clearly ought to condole with, or congratulate him—which is it?—upon the new alliance which our family has contracted.

Please let me hear from you within a couple of posts. Wishing you happy experiences of the holy state of matrimony, I am, dear Dora, your affectionate brother, JAMES COLPOYS.

"Well," said Dorothy, when Brancepeth had finished the letter with a lowered brow and curling lip, and now returned it to her between his finger and his thumb, "what do you think of it?"

"Think of it!" repeated Brancepeth; "I can only think of it as a very cool attempt to levy black-mail."

"But he will write to Lord Earlsfield, and all will come out."

"It will be entirely your blame if you leave Colonel Colpoys any revelations to make."

"But, Stephen," faltered Dorothy, "you do not know my difficulties. Of course I shall tell Earlsfield, but I must take him at the right time. His one idea just now is the marriage of his son to Mary Donne. When this is settled, he will be quite happy, and disposed to be generous. Only trust me, and I can manage all for us. You would not like me to be stripped of my aunt's money?"

"I have enough for us both," said Stephen, curtly.

"How unkind you are!"—and Dorothy began to cry, and to have recourse to her handkerchief—"when it is only for your sake that I want it. You would care nothing for me if I brought you nothing."

"I am quite content to have yourself, Dora," said Brancepeth.

"No," cried Dorothy, "you must not allow me to be robbed this way. You must let me manage for myself. Only have patience and trust me."

"If it comes to paying black-mail, I do not think that is good management, Dora. You are compromising my honour."

"I shall not pay black-mail. You would not grudge my giving money to poor Jim in his difficulties. I have often helped him before, and now you will take nothing from me."

"You must certainly dispose of your money as you please, Dora; but I would be ashamed if my wife paid a farthing away under compulsion of a threat. And this must really end. My position is becoming unbearable. You might have seen for yourself—that is, you might easily guess—what difficulties this mystery exposes me to."

"Ah yes, I know, I have seen," cried Dorothy, her jealousy again taking fire. "I saw that girl here to-day. She of course thinks you still unmarried, the designing——"

"Hush, Dora! be reasonable," said Brancepeth, putting his arm round her,—"be reasonable, for heaven's sake, and don't make any more scenes here. Miss Sparshott came here

purely on business—some money troubles of her father's—and very likely may never come again. There was not a word passed between us except purely on business. You can surely trust me, Dora."

"Yes, I can trust you, but I cannot trust her. She throws herself in your way, and all men are weak. But she shall have a lesson some day soon. She shall see——"

"For heaven's sake don't be absurd!" said Brancepeth, impatiently; "and now you must go away. Some one may be in any moment. Let me know when I can meet you, and we shall talk all this quietly over when you are less excited." As he spoke the door hastily opened, and his father put his head into the room. At first he was going to withdraw, but recognising Miss Colpoys, he came in and shook hands with her, and inquired for all the family at the Court.

"You have been too much a stranger in Earlsport lately, Miss Colpoys," said the old man, blandly. "We haven't attractions here

to compare with the Continent, but we are always glad to have the Earlscourt family with us as much as possible."

"You cannot complain of some of us," said Dorothy, laughing. "Earlsfield and my sister are here all the year round."

"True," said the banker, "but we do not see so much of them as we ought to do. But Earlsport has itself to blame; it has not always behaved well to a family to whom it owes so much—but there, I must not talk politics to ladies. Stephen, when you are disengaged I should like to see you in my room."

"I am going," said Dorothy; and giving her hand to the old banker, who shook it with effusive cordiality, she went out escorted by Stephen, who bade her good-bye at the bank door.

When he returned to his own room his father was still there, pacing thoughtfully up and down. "So, Stephen, that is your wife," he said, as he suddenly whirled round and confronted his son.

"Sir!" cried Stephen, aghast, and almost staggering against the door in his astonishment. "My wife! Then you——"

"Yes, I know all," said the banker, coolly sitting down in Stephen's own chair, and mechanically taking a pen in his hand while he looked critically at his son.

"How long?—how did you come to know?" exclaimed Stephen, unable to think clearly in his bewilderment.

"For a good while back, before I offered to take you into partnership. In fact, it was your marriage that made me think of taking you into the bank. When you returned to Earlsport, I felt bound to ascertain the source of the money you were in possession of, and made inquiries which led me to infer that you had married Miss Colpoys. I wanted nothing but the actual acknowledgment, which I have got to-day."

"Well, sir?" said Stephen, interrogatively, after a pause.

"Well, Stephen," continued the banker, "I

think you have done right. I quite approve of your marriage. Of course, there are difficulties to be faced, but we must meet these firmly, Stephen. I suppose Lord Earlsfield is still ignorant of the step his sister has taken?"

"It is no fault of mine, sir. I have constantly pressed upon Dorothy the necessity of letting her brother know at all risks, and have only reluctantly yielded to her entreaties to be allowed to manage the matter her own way. She is terribly afraid of Lord Earlsfield."

"Ah yes, that is where Lady Pye's money comes in. She marries without the knowledge or consent of her brother, who can consequently claim her ladyship's legacy. It is awkward. 'Against the wish or without the sanction of Lord Earlsfield' is, I believe, the expression in Lady Pye's will. But we must have that money, Stephen," and the old man laid his clenched hand firmly down on the writing-table.

"Well, sir, but how are we to get it?" said

Stephen, gloomily. "Dorothy certainly does not wish to give it up."

"You have no plan of your own?" inquired the banker. "No? Then I am disappointed in you. I thought you had, and your sharpness in the matter was one of the inducements that made me think of having you in the bank. But this is a speculation, not an investment. Well, we must make the best of it, and we must make a bold fight for the money."

"I am entirely in your hands, sir," said Stephen; "my wife has insisted on having her own management of the affair. For my own part, I am anxious that Lord Earlsfield should be told without further loss of time."

"It would only be right," said the banker, doubtfully.

"Certainly, sir. You must see for yourself that my position is a very unpleasant one, with this disclosure hanging over me. But for my promise to Dorothy I would bring the matter to issue at once, whatever the result."

"Umph," returned the banker. "I see no need for doing anything rashly; the income is still coming in, and Lord Earlsfield cannot recover from you. Still, as you say, we must think of something to be done. We may take it that Lady Pye's will is definite enough. Miss Colpoys would have married Weatherport the barrister, who fought George Colpoys's first election petition; but he—and everybody allowed him to be a good lawyer—fought shy of the proviso, and backed out. So we may safely take it that not much is to be done there. Our chance on the whole seems to be with Lord Earlsfield."

"So Dorothy has always said, but she is slow in approaching him."

"Naturally, the stake is a large one, as you will do well to bear in mind. We must think carefully over the matter, and act with caution. You must make settlements upon your wife equal to the means she has already under Lady Pye's legacy, but there will be no difficulty about that."

"Thanks," said Stephen, carelessly; "but, settlements and all, I do not suppose Lord Earlsfield will be particularly pleased to salute me as his brother-in-law."

"I don't think he has much cause to complain," said the banker, haughtily. "Nothing is more common than for the peerage to marry into banking families, and there are members of the House of Lords themselves who are bankers. We are not Rothschilds, but then we are not Jews. We Brancepeths held lands in Northumberland and Durham, when the Colpoyses were selling fish in Billingsgate. We have not a title, it is true, but dignities in our day are cheaper than they were. We shall hold our own with Lord Earlsfield on that score; but with regard to this money, he has decidedly got the pull upon us."

"And what do you advise me to do?" asked Stephen.

"We must look carefully into the matter, and do nothing hasty. I am inclined to think that your wife should be allowed to take her

own time to approach Lord Earlsfield ; but let her do nothing without telling us. The loss of the money will not be a deadly matter to us, but still it will be a feather in your cap if you can secure both it and the lady. It would not be pleasant for you to have it said that you had married an heiress and missed the fortune. And now, about these colliery bonds which I have been seeing about——" and here the banker plunged into a labyrinth of dry business details which have no interest for us.

CHAPTER XXIX.

DOROTHY'S PLOT.

When Dorothy Colpoys left the bank her mind was racked by a multitude of perplexities. To her, who had always regarded her elder brother with fear and suspicion, the disclosure which now pressed upon her was a terrible ordeal. Lord Earlsfield to her, as to all others except his son, had always been hard and unrelenting. He was just, he prided himself upon doing justice; but Dorothy could not help feeling that the exercise of Lord Earlsfield's justice always involved less hurt to himself than to others—and if he was just, he did not make profession of being generous. The title and his son as his suc-

cessor in it claimed his whole interest; his brothers and sisters were so many undesirable encumbrances; and if they could be made useful instead of burdensome, it was only just that they should be compelled to do their duty to the house. These Dorothy knew well would be the principles on which Lord Earlsfield would act, when she came to confess the step she had taken; and in consequence of it Lady Pye's legacy lay at his mercy. She had known this all along; she had foreseen that it would be so; and yet she had boldly faced the risk. When Brancepeth had discovered her not very carefully disguised partiality for him, and in his gratitude for her kindness, and longing for affection of some kind in his distressed and solitary condition, had offered her his love, she knew well what she was doing. But the temptation was strong. Dorothy wanted to be married, and she knew quite well that to any marriage whatever Lord Earlsfield would discover sufficient excuses for offering opposition. In her inmost

heart there had lurked a feeling that all this might be evaded by judicious secrecy; she might keep her dear husband all to herself and no one the wiser; and by living abroad and keeping out of the way of English people, she might continue to draw on Lady Pye's legacy for an indefinite period. She had also some vague ideas about prescription; if she could conceal her marriage long enough, if she had children to inherit, she thought that perhaps Lord Earlsfield's objections would be inoperative. In short, she wished to live ostrich-like, with her head hid from the perils which she had drawn upon herself. She told Brancepeth on their marriage of the conditions which attached to her fortune; and her anxiety was increased by the resolute pressure which he at once brought upon her to make a clean breast of everything to her brother. Brancepeth had thought little about her money, or if he had thought at all, he had expected that she would have the moderate provision proper for a lady of the Earlscourt

family, which would probably be enough to maintain them both in some species of comfort. He was then in a drifting mood; disposed to do anything, to accept anything; and the selfish avarice of his father, which he blamed as the cause of his own untoward fate, had given him a loathing for money. But when Dorothy told him how matters stood, he was sensitive enough to realise that the full difficulties of their position were more than she could easily be made to understand. It was with difficulty that Dorothy could comprehend that there was anything immoral in retaining possession of money which was probably forfeit. The money was left to her; in strict justice it should be her very own; if there was any wrong, it lay with Lord Earlsfield, who was oppressively making use of his authority to deprive her of it. That was true, Brancepeth admitted, but it did not alter the practical aspects of the case, nor would it affect the condemnation of the world when the matter was made public. They

must face the consequences of their position; should Lord Earlsfield follow an invidious course, then let the odium rest with him. Besides, as Brancepeth urged, there was his honour to be thought of. What would be said of him if he allowed the marriage to be kept secret, and continued to live upon the money which was properly Lord Earlsfield's? He was not sure that his position was not fraudulent; and he would not run the risk of being regarded as a cheat and an adventurer. No; Lord Earlsfield must be told all without delay, and the best terms possible made with him; and Brancepeth had offered to spare her the unpleasant task by going himself to her brother. But this Dorothy would not hear of.

All this had been talked over and over again during their early married days on the Continent; and at last Dorothy, goaded into some show of action, had come to England with Brancepeth, and they had settled

that he was to purchase the Dunes House, and be close to his wife if she required support when the difficulty with Lord Earlsfield arrived. Brancepeth was not much disposed to show himself again in Earlsport, but agreed to his wife's urgent request that he should be near to her. He felt, too, that he would like to have some information about his father's movements. The banker had no relations but himself; and, unless he left his money to a charity or some public object — a mode of benefaction of which he had always spoken with contempt—Brancepeth thought he had still an interest in his father's property. If the old man died intestate, or if he had not taken the trouble to revoke the will which the son knew had been made in his favour, then Brancepeth would succeed to everything. So he made up his mind to accompany Dorothy to Earlsport, not without some sense of pleasure, as has been said, in swaggering his independence in the vicinity of his unforgiving parent, and of

assuming an attitude of mysterious importance in the eyes of his fellow-townsmen.

With Brancepeth all had gone smoothly, and the reconciliation with his father had completely altered his prospects and lessened the importance of Lord Earlsfield's decision. It is to be feared it also lessened his sense of gratitude and obligation towards Dorothy; and he came to feel that he had acted like a fool, and to bear a half-grudge to her as an accomplice of his folly. Then, too, the sight of Cloete Sparshott had roused dangerous feelings of regret, and had thrown his mind back more and more upon the old life, with its tender associations and promises of what might have been. Dorothy and the marriage difficulty fell more and more into the background; his pressure to bring her to the point became relaxed, except when in any conversation with her the subject was forced upon him; and now that his father had learned the secret and counselled him to let his wife take her own time, he was hap-

pily content to let matters slide for the present.

As for Dorothy, she found herself, on her arrival at Earlscourt, no nearer the courage necessary to make a confession than she had previously been. The atmosphere of the house was full of Lord Earlsfield's domination, and under its influence she at once sank into the abject state of vassalage in which the other members of the family had to live. There was no one in whom she could confide. If she told Mrs Firebrace, the sense of religious duty which always animated that lady to make mischief would, she was sure, lead to her betrayal. Her brother George was good-natured; but since her marriage she had not been able to respond so readily to his frequent demands for loans, and it was decidedly against his interest that she should incur expenses upon a husband. Mary Donne she looked upon as a girl whom it would be of no advantage to confide in.

Only one opportunity had presented itself of saying anything to her brother, and that had not been a very promising one. Shortly after her arrival, Lord Earlsfield, remarking upon her taste for prolonged stays abroad, had remarked—

"It is a most providential thing for you that Lady Pye's money is so securely tied up. All these health-resorts are so full of adventurers that they would be sure to make an attempt to entangle you. You would do well, wherever you go, to let it be clearly understood that the money only remains with you as long as you are single."

"I should be giving them to understand what is not true then," said Dorothy, flushing up. "My aunt's money is mine, single or married, unless you forfeit it by refusing your consent. You mean, I suppose, that you do not intend to consent to my marriage under any circumstances, and look upon the reversion of the legacy as secure."

"Hem! no; I do not mean that," said

Lord Earlsfield, rather taken aback by the frank imputation. "Of course the money is yours, and I have never sought to interfere with it. However, if it came to your wanting to throw yourself away upon some *roturier*, I should feel myself justified in interposing."

"*Roturier* or not," returned Dorothy, "I have no doubt you would find some pretext for objecting, whoever came forward. There was——" and here she stopped short a flow of unseasonable recollections.

"Yes, you are thinking of Weatherport, the barrister," provokingly supplied his lordship. "Well, I had no doubt about the interested nature of his suit; and when I told him that he might have you but not the money, he very quickly turned his back. Should a suitable marriage offer, you may be sure that I would waive my own interests for what promised to be for your happiness."

"And what would you call a suitable marriage?" demanded Dorothy.

"One your equal in birth and years," said Lord Earlsfield, judicially; "one who is rich enough, so that no suspicion of mercenary motives may be inferred. A man whose past character will be a guarantee that he will not squander your money in the future. I do not see," continued Lord Earlsfield, "why, if you want to get married, you should not have found a proper match long ago. You are not so young now. You were born—let me see——"

"I am not in the way of going about looking for marriageable men," interrupted Dorothy, hastily. "I have no thought now of marrying."

"Well, well," said Lord Earlsfield, resignedly, "have your own way. It is no fault of mine, and if you can't get a husband to your liking, don't saddle the blame upon me;" and his lordship broke off the conversation, pleased with his own disinterestedness, and fully convinced that he had shown himself fraternally anxious to promote his sister's happiness.

These remarks gave Dorothy little encouragement to relieve her mind, and she continued to put off the evil day, thinking more of how she could pacify her husband than make the necessary disclosure to her brother. But now a fresh incentive had been added to having her marriage made public. The sight of Cloete Sparshott in Brancepeth's room had stirred a lower depth of jealousy than she cared to betray, especially as she was conscious that her own reticence was chiefly to blame for any misunderstanding. She came away full of wrath against this designing girl, who, as she fancied, would not quit the hold which she had once had over her former lover. For Brancepeth she was ready to find a thousand excuses—women easily pardon the opposite sex, though they are implacable to one another—but Dorothy could see clearly the dangerous character of this girl, who was striving to intrude herself, even though unwittingly, between man and wife. The question now was, how she was to be foiled, how she was

to be removed from Brancepeth's path. For a minute the idea of paying Cloete Sparshott a Rowena-to-Rebecca-like visit passed through Dorothy's mind, but the idea was too luxurious to be given effect to. No; that brief moment of crushing triumph, which would see her standing in all the majesty of her undoubted rights over the crushed and baffled hopes of her rival, was distinctly not to be realised. That would precipitate the disclosure, and in a way, too, that would be unbeseeming to all parties, and fatal to any chances of appeasing Lord Earlsfield. But something must be done to rescue Stephen Brancepeth from the snares of this designing woman.

While she sat in her own room thus pondering over her troubles, on the afternoon of her interview with Stephen, Dorothy conceived a plan which seemed to her so original, so comprehensive in its results, that she was almost frightened at her own cleverness, and wondered how she could have ever thought

of it, and whether it was not a direct instigation of the Tempter. Harold Colpoys had evidently been much struck with Cloete Sparshott's beauty, and in the case of so young a man there was but one step from that to actual love. And he already had a character for obstinacy, and Lord Earlsfield had been cautioned that he was to avoid thwarting his son wherever possible. If Harold should entangle himself with Cloete Sparshott and marry her, two objects of importance would be effected. She would be taken out of Brancepeth's way, and amid the ruin of Lord Earlsfield's plans and ambitions, her own offence would be a matter of little consequence in comparison. In the wrath which Lord Earlsfield might be expected to feel at his son's disobedience, he would possibly care but little to add to the fortune which would one day fall to Harold; and by judicious submission and penitence on her own part, his lordship might be induced to sanction her marriage with Brancepeth.

It was a bold, a Catiline-like idea, and Dorothy shivered as she thought of the part that it would naturally fall to her to play in the plot. To urge on Harold's passion for Cloete Sparshott and to get them married would serve all her ends. Yes, she would encourage Harold as much as she could in his love; she would make this girl's acquaintance and bring the two together. Harold would be easy enough to manage; and as for Cloete, would not Harold be Lord Earlsfield some day, and what girl, especially what girl brought up as Cloete had been, would be insensible to the prospects of such a position? Miss Sparshott removed from Brancepeth's way, and Lord Earlsfield's plans upset by Harold's marriage, she would the more readily find some chance of settling her own affairs in a favourable manner. She felt there was something wicked in these suggestions; but, on the other hand, there were good excuses in support of her resolution. Lord Earlsfield was unjust; and when

injustice cannot be met with open resistance, it must be foiled by secret craft: and what evil was there in plotting to forward her nephew's happiness against his father's foolish pride? Nay, it was rather a praiseworthy plan, argued Dorothy with herself; and she there and then made up her mind to carry it into execution.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE DOCTOR'S AFFAIRS.

QUITE unconscious of the Machiavelian genius his wife was developing, Brancepeth mechanically plodded through his work on the afternoon of the interview with Cloete and Dorothy. He sought refuge from his thoughts in running over long columns of figures, in checking accounts, in looking up balances, and in dashing off letters which made the recipients shrug their shoulders over the courtesy and complaisance of Brancepeth Brothers. And when all was done, he threw down his pen with a sigh at finding himself once more alone with his own thoughts.

His father then knew the secret, and was

prepared to give him his support. That was a relief, and to his father's shoulders Brancepeth was well content that the burden should be transferred. And now there was the future to be faced, and the prospects with which it was charged were coming very close to him indeed. Of Lord Earlsfield proving amiable he had very little expectation: the stake involved was too great a one for him to cheerfully waive his rights; and Dorothy, so far as he could see, had no ground to go upon. Some effect might be produced by exposing the line Lord Earlsfield had adopted towards his sister by forcing her to remain single; and he might be shamed, through fear of publicity, into making concessions. But this was a course not to be thought of. Brancepeth already sensitively shrank from what would be said about his marrying a woman older than himself, and keeping the affair a secret from her family. Whatever else was insinuated, he must not be exposed to the reproach of being a baffled fortune-

hunter. But he quite felt with his father that the money ought not to be let go. If he lost this, what, he thought with a sigh, had he for his marriage? A woman a good deal older than himself, who offered him but limited prospects of happiness, and with whom he would very likely have a good deal of worry and trouble in the future. He was now convinced that he had acted foolishly, and, like most men who let themselves drift down life, he charged his ill-luck to fate. But fate or no fate, he had chosen his way, and he must play out his part in an honourable manner. But the path of duty seemed to him neither pleasant nor promising just then.

And there was Cloete Sparshott. Well, she was the most disturbing feature in the situation — a perpetual reminder of his lost happiness, of the sacrifice of all that would have made the future bright and gladdening. If she were away, if she were married, if she were dead even, Brancepeth thought, with

some bitterness, that his life would be more bearable. But to see her in the full flush of fresh beauty and gracious maidenhood flitting before his eyes, drawing his thoughts away from the severe engagements which he had to fulfil, and making him curse his lot by contrast, was wellnigh too much for his endurance. But this, too, was fate.

There lay the memorandum which she had left with him. If he would, he could not avoid concerning himself with her affairs. He wished to be kind to her, to help. Perhaps, on the whole, he had not acted well towards her. True, he had set her at liberty from their engagement; but he had acted on this freedom, while she had remained true to her vows. Then when he had come back, he had kept silence. He had not made the explanation to which she was perhaps entitled, which, at all events, would have removed the possibility of misconception and the risk of pain. It was his duty to make her some reparation, and here was the chance.

Dr Sparshott's embarrassments had always been notorious; and if he could now do something to rescue him from his difficulties, Brancepeth tried to think that it would be something to add to the creditor side of his account with conscience.

The Doctor's acceptance for twenty-five pounds was to Mr John Spung, a name which Brancepeth recollected in his young days as that of a small dealer in an out-of-the-way street, who had an evil reputation as a poacher in the Elsedale preserves, and who had more than once been in trouble over small smuggled consignments, which he had got through sailors in the dock or by the Earlsport fishing-boats. This was not a customer of the class in which Brancepeth Brothers usually interested themselves, and it was in some astonishment that he rang his bell for the requisite explanation.

It was answered by young Briggs.

"What do you mean by showing people pell-mell into my room, Briggs?" demanded Brancepeth, pouncing down upon that face-

tious gentleman as the prime cause of his morning's disquiet. "I won't have any one shown in here unless I am disengaged."

"Well, sir," returned Briggs, with all the assurance he could muster, "I knew you were alone when I brought Miss Sparshott up—wouldn't have done so otherwise, I assure you, sir. And when the Hon'ble Miss Colpoys heard you were alone with a lady, she followed hard at my heels and *would* come in."

"You're a fool, Briggs," was the uncomplimentary rejoinder. "Take care that this does not occur again, or it will be the worse for you. Do you know a man called Spung?"

"Spicey Spung! Yes, sir," returned Briggs, readily. "I have that hon—I mean I know Spung keeps a grocer's shop in the general way, hard down by the Elsedale Coal Wharf."

"Has he a bank account here?"

"A bank account? No, not here nor anywhere else, I imagine. He is a shifty customer is Spicey. They call him so from the hodours in his shop. What though the spicey

breezes——" and Briggs began to feel his spirits rising at the thought of his reminiscences of Mr Spung.

"Then what does he mean by sending his bills to us for collection? What have we to do with the fellow? Look there," and Brancepeth handed to Mr Briggs the Doctor's promissory-note.

"Ah," said the clerk, taking up the document between his finger and his thumb and looking at it meditatively. "That is a part of Mr Mold's little game, I fancy."

"What do you mean by Mr Mold's little game?" demanded Brancepeth, testily.

"Well, it was Mr Mold asked us to undertake the collection of any of Dr Sparshott's bills that Spung had in his hands. He has been looking after the Doctor's affairs has Mr Mold; at the same time after the Doctor's daughter, if all tales are true;" and young Briggs turned his eyes towards the ceiling in a careless manner, as if his remark had no earthly interest for his interlocutor.

"Indeed," said Brancepeth, with equal indifference; "if Mr Mold is looking after Dr Sparshott's affairs, why should he bother us with them? Meantime I have undertaken to arrange this matter. Take this cheque on my private account for the amount of Dr Sparshott's bill. And, Briggs,—you know this man Spung. I want to have a talk with him. Bring him here to me to-morrow forenoon. Say I want to see him about this bill."

"The Spicey one, sir!" returned Mr Briggs, gladly. He scented an intrigue which would be an agreeable relaxation to the monotony of business, as well as something rousing to relate to the Vikings. "Yes, I'll produce him alive or dead. You may rely upon my discretion and secrecy, sir."

"You are an ass, Briggs. There is no secrecy involved in the matter, and if it had required discretion, you are the last man in the world I would have intrusted with it. Be off now, and mind what I told you about visitors to my room, after this."

Outside the door young Briggs made a grimace, struck an attitude, and tapped his forehead. "Thou hast it now," he soliloquised, addressing an imaginary listener in the passage. "The iron hast entered into thy soul. Oh, beware, my lord, of jealousy; it is the green-eyed monster which doth mock, *et ceterer*r, *ceterer*r. Now we are a-going to do business;" and Mr Briggs returned to his ledger, to waste the time paid for by Messrs Brancepeth in constructing a drama of love and revenge and intrigue, with a leading share in the cast assigned to himself.

And so Mold was interfering in Dr Sparshott's affairs. There was no reason why he should not, if he felt any pity for the Doctor's embarrassments; but Stephen was disposed to be very angry at his interposition. And he was looking after the daughter, according to young Briggs. Well, he knew Briggs to be a fool and a tattler, and there was little good in laying stress upon what he said. But why should Mold bother himself about the Doctor's

troubles? Brancepeth had never detected any signs of benevolent weakness about him. On the contrary, he had heard that Mold was rather partial to sharp practice when he could indulge in it, and was only kept in bounds by the opposition of his partner, George Fossebraye. He had noticed Mold's affectionate manner towards Cloete at Mrs Fossebraye's dinner-party, but had thought nothing about it then. He had been too much engrossed by his own feelings. But this revelation about the bill and Spung gave the matter quite a different complexion. He would see Spung and sift him; he had meant to examine the man as to whether he held any more of the Doctor's acceptances; and if he found that there was any foul play going on, let Mr Mold look to himself. But why should Cloete Sparshott not marry Mold? was the question that suggested itself to Stephen as he sat at his desk pondering over these things. The match, in a worldly point of view, was good enough, doubtless. Mold must be passing

well off, and would be able to save her from the difficulties and struggles of her father's household. It would be a marriage of convenience, and he himself had made one. What right had he to trouble himself about the matter? And yet his heart stood up in arms at the idea of Mr Mold, with his age, and his rolling eyes, and his cat-like treacherous manner, becoming Cloete's husband. He had wished she were married, that she might be removed from his thoughts; but this was not the kind of marriage he had contemplated. And if Mold were making her father's affairs a means of influencing her, he, Brancepeth, would soon let him know with whom he had to deal.

Impatient and excited by his thoughts, Brancepeth in vain tried to apply himself to work. He strolled out, intending to walk to the club and lunch, in search of distraction; but as he passed the end of Colpoys Square, the fresh sea-breeze blowing up Else Street, with a bracing salty nip and fresh odours

of ozone, made him change his mind. Yes, a sail was what he wanted. The wind blew fair from the south-west, and it was just an afternoon for a cruise along by the cliffs on the headland, as far, perhaps, as Muddleham Point. He had frequently of late taken excursions on the water with Tom Bowse, a smart fisherman whom he had often accompanied in his younger days, who had a trim sail-boat which he hired out for pleasure trips. As he passed along the quay, Charley Hanmer, the Alderman's son, who was grumbling at being kept on duty there in a wooden box superintending the lading of one of his father's vessels bound for the Baltic, hailed him, and invited him to share his primitive lunch of sandwiches and bottled stout, which Brancepeth cheerfully accepted.

"So you have settled down to the bank for good," said that ingenuous youth; "jolly good billet too. Look at me stewing all summer and freezing in winter in this infernal sentry-box, and without even a share in

the business. You are a partner now, ain't you?"

"Well, I believe I am something of that sort, but I can't say that I know much about the business."

"I daresay you'll soon learn. My governor, who was about your place the other day, said he was hanged if he didn't think you would turn out as great a screw as the old un."

"Well," said Brancepeth, laughing, "I suppose I ought to feel greatly flattered by the Alderman's good opinion; but I suspect it will take me some time before I am able to fill the old one's shoes."

"Say," said Master Charley, his mouth half-full of cold pie, "have you quite given up that young woman of yours? Saw her the other day as blooming as a peony, and stepping like a three-year-old. If you are off, I wouldn't mind going on. She is quite another sixpence to that confounded scraggy girl, Emma Manx, my revered parents are boring me to marry."

"Which young woman do you allude to?" fenced Brancepeth. "Really, Master Charley, your provincial mind does my reputation for gallantry an injustice if you expect I could recognise the subject of your remarks under so very general a description."

"Oh, come, I say, as if you didn't know well enough who I mean! Miss Sparshott, to be sure, whom you were always dangling after. Never heard of any other girl who had anything to say to you."

"The field is clear for me, I can assure you, Hanmer," returned Brancepeth; "and now, thanks for your hospitality. Come out soon to the Dunes House, and I will pay my debt."

"Oh, hang it, I say, you are not going off like that!" cried Hanmer. "I am just going to open some more stout. Don't go, my dear fellow, for I won't have a soul to speak to all the afternoon, except that oaf Flukes, the first mate, and he is half-screwed already. Stop and have a split soda, and I'll——" but Brancepeth was out of earshot already, and

the deserted Charley took out his watch with a sigh of despair, and returned to his box to look out for any chance acquaintance who might help him to beguile the working hours of the afternoon.

It is a stiff pull over the Earlsport bar when the tide is racing in against you, and Brancepeth and Tom Bowse had to bend to their oars as the boat tossed about upon the rollers; but once outside Wreck Point, as the southern extremity of the harbour was called, from the many vessels that had met their fate there while making for port, the wind was caught, the sail hoisted, and away the boat flew, coasting the Dunes, with their low swelling expanse, the Earlscourt woods beyond it, with the grey gables of the house peeping over the tree-tops, and the wooded heights of the uplands beyond closing in the background. Brancepeth, with the tiller-ropes in hand, could throw himself back in the stern; and, when pipes were lit, Tom Bowse had much to tell of maritime ad-

ventures of old days, of recent boating perils, of being blown off the coast and forced to run to the Wash for shelter, of little smuggling adventures with the Dutch and Belgian hookers, and tricks played upon the watchful coastguards. And Brancepeth cast his cares to the winds and listened and chattered as lightly as he had done in the excursions which he and Tom had been wont to make in his old college vacations before he had conceived that life could contain such perplexities and troubles. "Hold her off a bit, Master Stephen," said Tom, as the headland, with its rugged border of beetling cliffs, came over their bow; and away they flew, past stern-looking black rocks, polished and slippery with the fierce dash of the sea, green coves that led down in terraces to the water's edge, and dark recesses where the waves lapped with a sullen lull, and which were carefully noted in the smugglers' chart in older days. Past the Devil's Nose, frowning upon them as they hugged the wind to clear the North

Point, and opened up the low sandy coast that stretched as far as the town of Muddleham, with its point and lighthouse and the shipping lying between. And as they turned they could see the Basket Shoal, a black dot upon the sea-horizon, with the white tower of its lighthouse in the evening sunset. They tacked back more leisurely, and it was dark before Brancepeth was again landed at Earlsport Quay. He shrank from his lonely house upon the Dunes, and preferred to invite himself to dinner with his father, and listen to the maxims of financial wisdom that fell from the old man's lips.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A WARNING.

The piety of former lords of Earlsfield had built and endowed a row of red brick almshouses for the wives and spinster daughters of decayed citizens of Earlsport, and though their successors had sorely grudged the benefaction, they still exercised a certain control and patronage over the institution, which, half buried among shrubs and creepers, stood picturesquely enough upon the western outskirts of the town, looking down upon the open valley of the Else below. Lord Earlsfield grumbled at the property which had been alienated, and George thought ruefully of how much better the £1200 a-year which

it now brought in would have been in his own pockets; but the deed was done, and there was no help for it; and Lord Earlsfield turned the charity to the best account he could by making it a provision for old servants and for the widows or daughters of political supporters in Earlsport, a course which furnished a fruitful source of attack for the editor of the Opposition paper. The ladies of Earlscourt had always been looked upon as under an obligation to take an interest in the pensioners; but Mrs Firebrace and the vicar, who was Warden, had quarrelled over the doctrine suitable for the condition of the inmates, and Lord Earlsfield had sternly decided that the vicar was to be left to discharge his spiritual duties unmolested. Mrs Firebrace had accordingly washed her hands of the almshouses; Dorothy had never been able to take any interest in them; and the duty had been delegated to Mary Donne since she had come to stay at the Court. No better fortune could have befallen the old ladies, for Mary came

and went like a ray of sunshine, brightening their old lives with her kind cheery presence, reading good books to those who were so disposed, and entering into all their chat and gossip with those who were still of the world worldly. She knew the full history of all the pensionaries and the Christian names of their friends and relations, was deeply skilled in all their troubles, had by heart the treasured letters which they would make her read to them over and over again. Thursday, the day of her coming, was a *festa* in the almshouses, and the privilege of giving her tea was a source of much jealousy and rancour among the pensioners, and of nice discrimination on the part of Mary herself, so that she might not encourage rivalries. In late visits, she had envied these old ladies the repose and peace of their lives, and had thought what a happy escape from her troubles it would be if Lord Earlsfield would only allow her to stay there and rule over them for the rest of her life.

On Thursday morning, as Mary was crossing the hall on the way to her room to prepare for her visit, George Colpoys came hurriedly up to her.

"Look here, Mary!" he burst forth in a tone of fierce eagerness that was the extreme reverse of his usual indolent utterance, "I must speak to you to-day—to-morrow it may be too late. It isn't merely to tell you that I love you. I have told you that pretty clearly already, one way or another; and it isn't altogether to ask you if you will try to love me, though that question may have to be put too. But it is to talk over yourself and how we can serve you; for, by heavens! Mary Donne, you are in a hole, and I don't see that any one but myself can take you out of it."

Thus, when Mary appeared in considerable perturbation, equipped for her walk, George was waiting for her in the hall, thoughtfully tapping his boot with his cane. But before they could set out, the library door opened, and Lord Earlsfield came out. He stood upon

the door-step, and carefully scanned the sky, as if settling in his own mind the chances of a speedy change of weather. At length he turned suddenly round to the member.

"My letter made it quite clear to you what my views are with regard to Miss Donne?" he sternly asked in a low voice.

"Quite clear," retorted George, with a sullen look shot right into his brother's eyes.

"And can I depend on your co-operation?" demanded Lord Earlsfield, in tones which had an accent of menace in them.

"I won't have anything to do with it," said George, who, though he would gladly have temporised, yet also felt his courage sustained by the unwonted fact that he was fighting his brother from a superior moral position. "It is a business entirely out of my line. I have done several fishy things in my time, but I must say——"

"Say nothing, sir," interrupted Lord Earlsfield, sternly; "it was your assistance, not your criticism, I asked. But you will be good

enough to impress upon your mind that my ward and the daughter of Colonel Donne is not a fit subject for your flirtation."

"I never regarded her as such," broke in George.

"Any more than she is a fitting wife for a pauper to marry," pursued his lordship, kindly.

"I know that only too well," sighed the member.

"You will therefore take care in future how you divert her attention from her duty, which is to accustom herself to the idea that she is to be Harold's wife—to be Lady Earlsfield one day," continued his lordship, emphasising his warnings with his forefinger in the face of the unfortunate listener. "It will be better for her, still better for yourself; for as sure as I stand here, George Colpoys, if you cross me in this, the dearest wish of my heart, I shall make you suffer for it all your life long."

These last words were rendered all the more impressive by the speaker dropping his voice into a whisper as Mary Donne now came up

to them, hatted and gloved and cloaked for her walk, with a dainty little basket on her arm, well loved of her friends, the pensioners.

"I am afraid the roads will make rather heavy walking, my dear," said Lord Earlsfield to her with a pleasant smile, as he turned away towards the library; "after so much rain, you would have done much better to have taken the pony-carriage."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE WAY OUT OF A HOLE.

Not a word was said between George Colpoys and Mary Donne as they walked down the avenue under the old elm-trees. The rooks had shaken the wet off their wings, and were now wheeling about in the air cawing loudly for wind. By-and-by they came upon a covey of Mary's pigeons, which circled round them in answer to her "coo-coos," and lighted a little distance in advance of them on the gravel, in hopes of crumbs or a passing petting. But Mary Donne's mind was too disturbed to take the usual notice of her favourites; and the doves, when they had seen her fairly pass them, flew up into a tree and sat upon

the extremity of a bare branch, looking after her until she was out of sight, and pondering, doubtless, as to the causes of their being neglected. George, with a gloomy expression on his face, and his head bent, stalked along by her side with a forlorn-hope sort of stride, altogether unlike his usual jaunty and springy step. He felt in the mood for doing something desperate, if he could only hit upon the means of doing it. He would have hurled Jupiter's own thunderbolts back upon him if he could. He felt as if he would like to crush Lord Earlsfield between his hands, and thwart every scheme his lordship had in his head. And above all, how could he frustrate his brother's plans about Mary Donne without burying his own prospects in their ruins?

The silence was still unbroken when they left the park and came out upon the road leading to the town. Before them lay the Dunes stretching their green and withered-grey undulations from the outskirts of Earls-

port northwards until they rose up to where their rugged heights marked the commencement of the cliffs. Beyond the Dunes the sea was tossing about its dark-green waters, and breaking up broad white patches of foam, which testified to last night's gale, the dull monotonous murmur of the waves now and again swelling into sullen roar. Odours of sea-weed and salt water were blown in upon the land, and over all the sun was struggling through broken clouds, now bursting forth in a flood of light upon the waters, and then speedily veiling itself in shadow, again to appear and disappear with equal celerity. It was a bracing morning, that could scarcely fail to have some stimulating effects even upon the unstrung nerves of the two walkers.

"Mary," said the member, as he gave a furtive glance back in the direction of Earlscourt, as if to satisfy himself that they were followed by no spy upon their motions—"Mary Donne, as I told you this

morning, we are both of us in a deuce of a hole."

"I don't know what you mean by a hole," returned Miss Donne, very gravely disdaining to notice the special description he had given of the situation; "and I don't know why you should have spoken to me as you did this morning. It is unkind, it is ungenerous, Mr Colpoys."

"Do you know what Earlsfield intends for you?" demanded George, abruptly.

Mary looked straight before her and made no answer.

"You do then; and what do you think of it? Well, a coronet always counts for something with most women, even when there is a mad head inside it. Take my advice, and see that the settlements and jointure are sufficient compensation. For as anxious as Earlsfield is to secure you for his son, his stinginess will come to the front as soon as he is face to face with parchment. But the game is in your own

hands, and it will be your own fault if you do not run yourself up to a premium."

"Mr Colpoys!" gasped Mary, "how can you—how dare you talk thus to me—thus insult me? You have no right to mention such things. You insult me, and you are ungrateful to Lord Earlsfield. I—I do not in the least know what you are talking about—and my heart is breaking," as her passion gave way to a flood of tears.

"My dear Mary—my dear, dear, dearest Mary," cried George, as he caught her hand in one of his, while he placed the other on her waist — "forgive me. I am a brute, and I am mad. It is enough to make any one mad to see your young life ruined in this fashion, and my only chance of happiness—not a very great one, I know—sacrificed to Earlsfield's infernal selfishness and pride."

Mary only continued to sob bitterly, but she did not seek to withdraw her hand or to resist his attempt to press her closer to himself.

"I know all," he said, while he sympathetically pressed her hand. "Earlsfield wrote me a note last night telling me that he meant to arrange a marriage between you and Harold, and intimating that I was to do all in my power to aid him in bringing it about. In fact, he as good as warned me off you. I was to praise Harold to you, and keep your mind full of the advantages of the match; and I was to impress upon him your beauty, your amiability, and your accomplishments, — as if even poor Harold with his cracked brains could not see these for himself. That, in plain English, is what Earlsfield set me as a task in a letter of six pages full of finely turned periods and Foreign Office phrases. And now you know the worst."

"I knew it before," said Mary Donne; "Lord Earlsfield prepared me for it before his son came home."

"Then it is a shame—an infamous shame. It is a piece of greater villany than cheating

at cards or hocussing a horse at Newmarket. I'm hanged if I would have done it. I don't believe even Jim Colpoys would have condescended to do such a thing."

It was always a consolation to George that his friends placed his brother the colonel on a much lower moral level than himself, and that in the reflection of Jim's demerits his own failings shone out in the light of positive virtues.

"But look here, Mary," cried the member suddenly; "it can't be. Just make up your mind to kick." Mary shook her head. "It is not possible that you could willingly consent to marry Harold, knowing as you do how uncertain he is—the—the lifelong misery that might be before you."

"I would sooner die," murmured Mary.

"There you are," cried George triumphantly; "and so you must just put down your feet and refuse the jump. There is no law in Britain can make a woman marry a man if she don't like him—more especially when

that man is mad too. In fact," added he solemnly, "I believe there is something about it somewhere in the Bible."

"Ah! but," said Mary, shaking her head sadly, "how can I go against Lord Earlsfield, who has been almost a father to me, who has given me a home, and who has never said an unkind word to me, and has always tried to make me happy? It would be base ingratitude if I were to set myself against his wishes now."

"Not at all," returned the member, sturdily; "he is asking you to do a thing that no man ought to insist upon a woman doing—that no gentleman would require a lady to do, considering your relative positions. If he has only been good to you for a motive of his own, the knowledge of that fact cancels all your obligations to him. Only show your spirit, and you will get out of the hole."

"Ah!" sighed Mary, "but how can I? What can I do?"

"Take me, Mary," returned George, drawing

her to him. "I am not mad, at any rate, and I love you better than any one else in the whole world—better than myself even, which seems to me to be the only thing I ever cared about until I began to think of you. I can't make a fine speech or poetry, and it would be ridiculous to go down on my knees in all this mud, but upon my soul I love you dearly. Ever since I began seriously to think about you, I have never been happy unless when I was with you, or had my eye upon you. Your voice is sweeter to me than—than the best music at the opera. I always kiss your gloves when I light upon them in the hall and no one is looking; and see here, I have half-a-dozen of your hairs which I picked out of your hat"—here he pulled out an envelope from his waistcoat-pocket. "No, hang it, these are trout-flies—yes, see there," as he at last found the precious relics; "but, for heaven's sake, don't laugh, Mary," as Miss Donne's sadness gave way to a passing sense of the ridiculous. "I have kept them next

my heart, and taken them out and kissed them every morning—like an idiot as I was, I daresay, and as you think me to be," concluded he, feeling slightly ashamed at finding himself plunging into such depths of sentiment. "Say something to me, for God's sake," he went on, as Mary Donne held down her head and remained mute, while the tears fell from her eyes. "If you can't say that you love me any just now, say that you will marry me, and try to love me afterwards. The smallest bit of love will set me up. Of course it will be hard lines, but we shall live somehow, and anything will be better for you than having to marry Harold ; and after all, if Harold dies without children, Earlscourt and the title must come to me. Of course it is a drawback my being a good deal older than you."

"It isn't that," said Mary, in a low voice.

"What is it, then, my darling?" inquired George, bending his face down close to hers until they almost touched one another. "Only

tell me what it is, and I'll move heaven and earth to do away with the obstacle."

"Lord Earlsfield!" sighed Mary.

"Lord Earlsfield be d—d," was the member's unfraternal exclamation, as he boldly impressed a kiss on Mary's brow. "We shall have to fight, or rather, I'll take it all upon myself. Don't you trouble about him, but tell me in one word, will you be my wife? No? You won't say so? Just one slight squeeze of the hand to tell me that you love me a little."

"But I don't know that I do," said Mary, sadly. "I am not sure. It is all such a whirl. I don't know that I could."

"It is easy enough," returned George, with the authority of experience. "You have just got to catch on to the idea, and the rest comes easy. Once you get the idea, the rest all comes by causation and evolution, and these sort of things. It will all come right if you marry me; and you will marry me, won't you?"

The desired information must have been silently conveyed, for George burst out, "God bless you, my own dearest Mary! You have made me the happiest fellow in the universe —much happier than ever a scamp like me deserved to be; and if I don't give up the whole of my life for you, may I be——"

"Hush!" whispered Mary. "I hear something coming."

They had been standing on a side-path of the road, screened from the town of Earlsport by a projecting corner of the park wall, and from the lodge at the gate by a bend in the way and a high beechen hedge. But the situation was not sufficiently private for love-making on a protracted scale; and as a gardener's cart came clattering round the corner from the town, the lovers resumed their walk. The minds of both were full of what had passed between them, until they found themselves nearing the cottage villas which formed the outskirts of Earlsport in that direction. Then George made another halt.

"Look here, Mary, my sweetest, let us understand each other. We are both pledged together, but we need not anger Earlsfield more than we can help by any hints about the matter. There will be row enough when the burst does come. We shall keep our own counsel until our chance turns up, and I don't think Harold will give you much trouble. His father does not see so far as he thinks, and the boy is madly in love with that Sparshott girl—the Museum man's daughter, you know—and as Earlsfield has been cautioned against thwarting him, why, he has got his work cut out. But if Earlsfield presses you again, you will tell me. It is my privilege now to look after you, is it not?"

"Yes," returned Mary, with a half-trustful, half-wistful look in her face, as she held out her hand. They were now at a small wicket-gate, which opened into a side-path to the almshouses. There was no one about, and regardless of the risk of being overlooked

from villa windows, George raised her hand and pressed it to his lips.

"Good-bye, my own dearest Mary," he said. "I have never been much of a fellow for any good, and for being useful, and that sort of thing; but if I do not try with all my soul to make you happy, I deserve to be hanged—yes, hanged, by Jove!" and with another kiss he relinquished her hand, and was presently striding along rapidly in the direction of the town.

Mary's head was in a whirl as she stood to take breath and think, once she was inside the almshouse grounds. The prospect was like a dream, an unsubstantial fleeting vision; but there behind it was the stern reality to which Lord Earlsfield had, she felt, irrevocably condemned her. Surely the means of escape now offered her must be as real too, else where was she? Yet it was difficult for her to grasp the fact that she was now George Colpoys's promised wife—George, whom but a short time ago she had, like all the rest of Earlscourt,

regarded as a good-natured, indolent ne'er-do-weel, who only wanted money to be prodigal and opportunity to be dissipated. And though she had never thought his failings heinous, and had felt drawn to him through their isolation in the grim circle of the Court with a kindly almost sisterly liking, she would have heartily laughed at the idea of regarding him as a lover. But when Lord Earlsfield had stunned her by disclosing his intention to marry her to Harold, it was to George that her mind had instinctively turned for sympathy, and she had found herself wishing that it had been him instead of the unhappy Harold that had been her destined lot,—that the compliments constantly paid her by the member, which she could not help treating as badinage, had been real love-making. But it was not easy for her to realise George Colpoys in the light of a lover. His shallow, careless, indolent disposition had nothing in it of the passion of a Romeo. And yet he must be in deep earnest, else how could he propose

to brave the anger of his brother, to whom he had always been in subjection, and upon whose humours he was so much a dependant? And he must be brave too, for it took a brave man to combat Lord Earlsfield's resolutions, especially when one was so entirely in his lordship's power. But would his courage last? Might he not fail at the supreme moment when Lord Earlsfield met him with the threat of casting him off and withholding all further assistance? "What would be her position then?" thought Mary. To be obliged to yield to Lord Earlsfield's wishes, or to be cast aside as an ingrate to her benefactor? If George risked all, she risked not less also. But could he be brave? Ah! could he be brave enough?

She looked, as if for an answer to her doubts, after the figure of the member, now nearing the entrance to the town. He had recovered his nonchalant air, and resumed his jaunty walk; his white hat again inclined to one side of his head; and his cane was

cutting its accustomed flourishes in the air. She felt sure he was whistling, — he was always whistling. Certainly he did not walk as if his mind was distracted by any doubt as to the issue of events. But was that his happy temperament which drew its colouring only from the present, and thought nothing of trouble until it met him face to face? Or was it the gait of a man who, having once made up his mind, was prepared to go forward whatever obstacles came in his way? "Ah! if he could be brave," thought Mary, with a sigh; "if he could only be brave enough to go through it all, then I think I could love him outright." And she went on her way to visit the pensioners.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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